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THE WORKS OF

G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE

EDITED BY

SIR HERBERT MAXWELL, BART.

VOLUME V.

CONTRABAND

Leaning back on the red velvet cushion of a sofa.

CONTRABAND

OR

A LOSING HAZARD

BY

G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY BERNARD PARTRIDGE

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CONTRABAND

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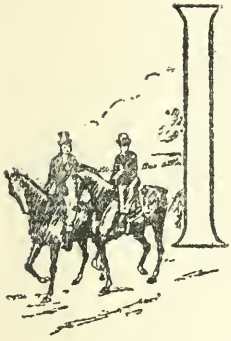
OR

A LOSING HAZARD

CHAPTER I

RAIN-CLOUDS



"IN confidence, Sir Henry"—

"In confidence, Mrs. Lascelles, of course. I think you can depend upon me." And Sir Henry, as directed by a weather-beaten guide-post, turned into a narrow lane on his homeward way, while the lady with whom he had been riding jogged her tired horse gently along the highroad, absorbed in thoughts, pleasant, suggestive, engrossing — not precisely in maiden meditation, for she was a widow—nor yet, although she was nearer thirty than twenty, wholly fancy free.

Mrs. Lascelles loved her horse dearly, and had been riding him with the liberality and confidence that springs from true affection, in a ladylike manner no doubt, and gracefully enough, but with consider-

able daring, and no small expenditure of pace. The good, generous animal had a perfect right to be tired, having borne his precious burden honourably and safely close to hounds as long as a stout old fox could live before them, and had fairly earned the caresses she lavished on his toil-stained crest and shoulders, while the hoof-tread of his late companion died out in the distance. Mrs. Lascelles, I have said, loved her horse dearly. For the first time in her life, perhaps, she was beginning to find out she could love something better than her horse.

The light waned rapidly. Heavy clouds, gathering in the west, sailed up steadily on the moaning wind that so often in our English winter rises with set of sun. The day had been sad-coloured and overcast, delightful for hunting purposes, but for every other pursuit melancholy in the extreme, and evening was drawing on, sadder, gloomier, and more disheartening than the day. Certain elms and ashes that skirted the highroad trembled in every leafless limb, shivering and whispering together, as if they too were moved by ghostly forebodings of cold and darkness to come. Why should Mrs. Lascelles have looked so radiant and happy? How had been kindled that light in her blue eyes; and what, in the name of chaste Diana, could have occurred during a day's hunting thus to fix and deepen the colour in her cheek? Was it that she loved to recall the stirring memories of the last few hours—the joyous rally of the find, the dash and music of the hounds, the pace, the pastures, the glorious turns and windings of the chase? Or was it that she had her own private successes to register, her own secret triumphs to record, exulting that she too had hunted her fox fairly in the open, and was running into him at last?

Rose Lascelles, like many another who has squared her life to the rule of expediency rather than right, was a woman thrown away. An ambitious girl, in her marriage with Mr. Lascelles, now deceased, she had been guided by her desire for social advancement rather than by individual preference, or even a taste for domestic life. He was young, handsome, agreeable,—a finished man of the world,—thoroughly selfish; and some women would have loved him dearly, but for Rose Vanneck he was simply an eligible partner as heir to a good fortune and a title. So he treated her very badly, outraged her feelings, brought all sorts of people into her drawing-room, spent her money recklessly as his own, and finally drank himself to death, just six months too early to make his wife a peeress; having lived long enough, however, to leave her in the enjoyment of as comfortable a jointure as if he had succeeded to the title, and so far content with her lot that she appreciated the thorough independence of her position; for who is so completely her own mistress as a childless widow, young and attractive, with a balance at her bankers?

It is needless to say she had many suitors. Independent of her well-filled purse, the lady's own charms were powerful enough to collect men of all ages, stations, and characters in her train. The clear blue eyes, so bright, so frank, might have seemed hard and cold but for the dark pencilled lashes that shaded their lower as richly as their upper rims; the white even teeth would have been too broad and strong but for the sweet red lips that disclosed them so graciously in half-saucy, half confiding, and wholly winning smiles. There might have been a shade too much of colour in her cheek, of auburn in her hair, but that health and

rich vitality so obviously imparted to each its lustre and its bloom. There was nobility in her arched brows and regular Norman features, just as there were grace and dignity in her tall, well-rounded figure; nevertheless, something beyond and independent of these physical advantages gifted her with a peculiar fascination of her own. She seemed to bloom in the natural freshness and fragrance of a flower, a meadow, or a landscape; bright and healthy as a cow in a June pasture, a child from its morning tub, as Venus herself glowing and radiant, emerging like a sunrise from the Eastern sea!

Such a woman was pretty sure to obtain her full share of admiration in any society. Perhaps nowhere would her conquest be more general and more permanent than in the hunting-field. When she came down from London by train for the enjoyment of her favourite amusement with the Bragford hounds, lords, commoners, squires, yeomen, farmers, and horse-breakers combined in yielding her a general ovation. To break a fence for Mrs. Lascelles; to open a gate for Mrs. Lascelles; to show Mrs. Lascelles the narrowest part of the brook or the soundest side of the ford, was a pride, a pleasure, and a privilege to all who buckled on the spur. If Mrs. Lascelles had sustained a fall, which Heaven forbid! or otherwise come to grief by flood or field, saddles would have been emptied, stalwart scarlet arms been extended, and whiskers of every hue known to art or nature would have stood on end with dismay, ere a single hair of that dainty auburn head should have touched the earth.

Of course they fell in love with her by scores. Of course, too, the man who paid her least attention, the man whose whole thoughts seemed centred in himself, his boots, his horses, and his riding, found

most favour in her wilful woman's heart. That was why to-day she had refused point-blank to become the wife of a much younger man, rich, good-hearted, actual partner in a bank, possible member for a county; that was why she had imparted this refusal, "in confidence, Sir Henry," to the companion of her homeward ride, and gathered, from the manner in which her narrative was received, hopes that sent the light dancing to her eyes, the blood rising to her brain.

What she saw in Sir Henry it passes my knowledge of feminine nature to explain. He was twenty years older than herself, grey, worn, and withered; showing such marks of dissipation and hard living on his sunken features as had nearly obliterated every trace of the good looks which were now a matter of history. Twice a widower, with a grown-up family, an impoverished estate, and not the best of characters, Mrs. Lascelles could scarce have selected a less eligible admirer amongst the troops of light horsemen who aspired weekly to her favour; but she had chosen to set her heart on him nevertheless, and in her whole life had not felt so happy as to-day, when she flung down, "in confidence," the precious pearls that had been offered her before the unclean animal who should hereafter turn and rend her for her pains. Women seldom give away their hearts unasked. When they are so liberal, I think the gift is usually without reserve; though even if accepted, like many other priceless things, it is rarely valued at its worth. Sir Henry never told Mrs. Lascelles he cared for her; but habit is second nature—and he had made so much love in his life that his manner to all women had insensibly acquired a certain softness and tenderness, which perhaps constituted the only charm left

by a youth spent in ease, self-indulgence, and the luxury of doing as much harm as lay in his power. She thought, no doubt, she had at last succeeded in winning the one heart she coveted; and undismayed by grizzled whiskers, grown-up daughters, or an impoverished estate, rode soberly along, lost in a rosy dream that caused the tired horse, the coming rain, the gathering night, to seem but so many delightful ingredients of a day taken out of Paradise express for the occasion.

Mrs. Lascelles, as behoved her sex and position, went hunting with becoming pomp, accompanied by a groom, whose duty it was, so far as his powers of equitation permitted, to keep close to his mistress during the day. In addition to this functionary, other servants were disposed and dotted about at different posts,—such as the railway station, the country inn, where a carriage was left with dry things, the stable where her hunters stood, and the terminus in London, where a brougham awaited her return.

Altogether, a day's hunting involved the employment of some half-dozen people, and the expenditure of as many pounds. With all this forethought, it was surprising that she should have found herself riding home at nightfall, alone and unattended, perfectly satisfied nevertheless with her situation, and utterly forgetful of the groom, whose horse had lost a shoe, and who was to overtake her as soon as another had been put on.

So she patted her favourite's neck, smiled, sighed, shook her head, and relapsed into a brown study and a walk.

The rain gave her but little warning. Two or three large drops fell on the sleeves of her habit, then came a squall and a driving shower, such as

wets the best broadcloth through and through in less than five minutes. Even the good horse shook his ears in mute protest; and Mrs. Lascelles was fain to sidle him under the hedge, cowering for as much shelter as could be got from the ivy-covered stem of a stunted pollard tree.

People have different ideas of pleasure. For some, the most uncomfortable incidents of the chase borrow a charm from the seductive pursuit to which they are unavoidable drawbacks. The infatuated votary accepts falls, lame horses, drenched garments, long rides in the dark, considerable fatigue, and occasional peril of body, with an equanimity marvellous to the uninitiated; and only to be accounted for by the strange perversity of human nature when in headlong pursuit of an idea. Perhaps, after all, the career of life is not inaptly represented by a run with hounds. Difficulties to be surmounted, and risks to be encountered, add infinitely to the zest of both. In each, there are unremitting exertions to get forward, a constant strain to be nearer and yet nearer some imaginary place of prominence and superiority—an emulation mellowed by good-fellowship with those whom we like and respect for their very efforts to surpass ourselves—a keen excitement damped only by vague wonder that the stimulant should be so powerful, by dim misgivings of which the fatal *cui bono?* is at the root; lastly, a pleasing sense of fatigue and contentment, of resignation rather than regret, when the whirl and tumult of the day are over, and it is time to go home.

Mrs. Lascelles, sitting in a wet habit under the hedge, neither drooped with fatigue nor shivered with cold. Her reflections must have been strangely pleasant, for she was almost disappointed

when her servant trotted up with the lately shod horse, and touching his hat respectfully, suggested that the weather was getting "wusser"—that the horses would catch their deaths, poor things!—that it was still five miles to the station, and that they should proceed—he called it "shog on"—in that direction without delay.

The groom was a sober fellow enough, but he had decided, with some justice, that such a wetting as he was likely to encounter justified a glass of brandy on leaving the blacksmith's shop.

His loyalty to his mistress and love for the good animals under his charge were, doubtless, not diminished by this cordial; and while with numbed fingers he unrolled the waterproof cape that was buckled before his own saddle, and wrapped it round her dripping shoulders, he could not forbear congratulating Mrs. Lascelles that "things," as he expressed it, "was no wuss."

"The 'osses is tired, ma'am, no doubt, an' a long trashing day it's been for 'osses; but, bless ye, Ganymede, he won't take no notice; he'll have his head in the manger soon as ever his girths is slacked, and they're both of 'em as sound as when they left the stable. Ah! we've much to be thankful for, we have; but how you're to get to the station, ma'am, without a ducking—that's wot beats me!"

"I must take my ducking, I suppose, James, and make the best of it," she answered pleasantly; "but it's going to be a fearful night. It comes on worse every minute."

James, who had dropped back a horse's length, now pressed eagerly forward.

"I hear wheels, ma'am," said he, "and it's a'most a living certainty as they're going our way. If it was me, I'd make so bold as ask for a lift inside.

A one-horse fly halted at her side.

Ganymede, he'll lead like a child, and you'll have all the more time to—to—shift yourself, ma'am, afore the train be due."

While he spoke, a one-horse fly, with luggage on the top, halted at her side, a window was let down, and a pleasant woman's voice from within proffered, to the benighted lady on horseback, any accommodation in the power of the occupant to bestow.

It was already too dark to distinguish faces; but the stranger's tones were courteous and winning. Mrs. Lascelles had no hesitation in availing herself of so opportune a shelter. The flyman was off his box in a twinkling, the lady leaped as quickly to the ground, James signified his approval, Ganymede gave himself a shake, and in another minute Mrs. Lascelles found herself jerking, jolting, and jingling towards the station by the side of a perfect stranger, whose features, in the increasing obscurity, she strove vainly to make out.

Some indefinable instinct suggested to her, however, that her companion was young and pretty. A certain subtle fragrance which may or may not be the result of scents and essences, but which seems indigenous to all taking women, pervaded her gloves, her hair, her gown, nay, the very winter jacket with which she defied the cold. The rustle of her dress as she made room, the touch of her hand as she took sundry wraps from the front seat of the carriage and heaped them in her guest's lap, told Mrs. Lascelles that this errant damsel, wandering about in a hired fly through the rain, was one for whom lances had already been broken, and champions, it may be, laid gasping on the plain. For several seconds she racked her brains, wondering who and what the traveller could be, where

coming from, where going to, why she had never met nor heard of her before.

It was not to be expected that silence between these two ladies should last long. Cross-examining each other with great caution and politeness, they presently discovered that they were both bound for London, and by the same train. This coincidence involved, no doubt, a feeling of sisterhood and mutual confidence; yet the coloured lights of the station were already visible, and the fly was turning into its gravelled area, ere Mrs. Lascelles could divine with any certainty the place her companion had lately quitted.

"What a long drive it is, to be sure!" observed the latter wearily. "And they call it only five miles to Midcombe Junction from Blackgrove!"

Mrs. Lascelles felt her heart give a jump, and she caught her breath.

"From Blackgrove!" she repeated. "Do you know Sir Henry Hallaton?"

"I *do* know Sir Henry," replied the other with emphasis. "I know him thoroughly!"

CHAPTER II

AN ALLIANCE

IN the boudoir of a dear little house, just far enough off Piccadilly to be out of the roar of its carriages, sat Mrs. Lascelles, waiting luncheon, as she called it, for her travelling companion of the day before.

The ladies had been so charmed with each other in their railway journey the previous evening, that an invitation to the pleasantest of all meals was given, and accepted with great cordiality, before they parted; and the mistress of No. 40, as she loved to designate it, was glad to think that her pretty home should look its best for the reception of this new friend. A canary was perched in the window, a fire blazed in the grate, a pug-dog was snoring happily on the rug, a bullfinch swelling in splendid sulks on the work-table: with a peal at the door-bell this simple machinery seemed all set in motion at once — the canary twittered, the pug barked, the bullfinch subsided, Mrs. Lascelles jumped up, the door opened, and a footman announced "Miss Ross!"

If Miss Ross looked well under the dim light of a railway carriage, she lost nothing of her prestige when exposed to the full glare of day. She was pale, certainly, and perhaps a little too thin, but her black eyes were certainly splendid;

while over her rather irregular features and her too resolute mouth and chin was cast a wild, mournful expression, half pathetic, half defiant, expressly calculated, it would seem, for the subjugation of mankind, especially that portion who have outlived the fresher and more healthy tastes of youth; add to this, masses of black hair, a little bonnet with a scarlet flower, a graceful figure, lithe as a panther's, clad in a dark but very becoming dress, and I submit that the general effect of such an arrival fully justified the disturbance it created in the boudoir at No. 40.

Mrs. Lascelles, it is needless to observe, took in all these details at a glance—she had reckoned up her visitor, as the Yankees say, long before she let go the hands she clasped in both her own with so cordial a welcome.

"This woman," thought she, "would be a formidable enemy. I wonder whether she might not also prove a valuable friend."

Then, sharp and cold, shot through her the misgiving of the day before; what had she been doing at Blackgrove, this dark-eyed girl, and what did she know of Sir Henry Hallaton? No stone would she leave unturned till she found out.

Miss Ross, however, did not seem at all a mysterious person, at least on the surface.

Before she had taken off her bonnet and made friends with the pug, she had already broached the subject nearest the other's heart.

"You are very kind to me, Mrs. Lascelles," she said, folding the pug's ears back with her white, well-shaped hands; "but I must not come into your house and waste your substance under false colours. Do I look like an adventurer, adventuress, —what do you call it?—a person who lives from

hand to mouth, who has no settled abode, a sort of decently dressed vagrant, not exactly starving, but barely respectable? Because that's what I *am*!"

Mrs. Lascelles stared, and called her dog away.

"I went to Blackgrove as an adventuress," continued Miss Ross, in calm, placid tones, with no appearance of earnestness but in the firm lines round her mouth, "I left it as an adventuress. I can hold my own anywhere, and with anyone; but I should have been worse than I am had I stayed a day longer in that house."

"Tell me about it!" exclaimed Mrs. Lascelles eagerly. "I am sure you are not—not—at all the sort of person I shouldn't like to know."

"I will tell you," said the other, speaking lower and faster now, with a bright gleam in her black eyes. "I haven't a friend in the world—I never did have a woman friend; if I had—well, it's no use thinking of that now. Never mind; I'll tell you everything, because—because I fancy I can guess something, and you ought to know. Have you ever seen Miss Hallaton, Helen Hallaton?—a girl with black eyebrows, and a face like an old Greek bas-relief. Well, I was to be Helen's companion;—does that surprise you? If you were a widower, Mrs. Lascelles, and had daughters, am I the sort of person you would engage as their companion?"

It was a difficult question. From the widower's point of view, Mrs. Lascelles was not quite sure but she *would*. Miss Ross, however, went on without waiting for an answer.

"Shall I tell you how I lived before I ever thought of being anybody's companion? Shall I tell you all I learned in a school at Dieppe, in a convent at Paris, amongst the strange people who struggle on for bare existence in the foreign quarter

of London? I have sat for a model at half a crown an hour; I have sung in a music-hall at half a guinea a night. I suppose it was my own fault that I was born without a home, without a position, without parents, as I sometimes think,—certainly without a conscience and without a heart! Yet I know hundreds who have been twice as bad as I ever was, without half my excuses. Mrs. Lascelles, I have been at war with most of my own sex and the whole of the other ever since the days of short frocks and a skipping-rope. Don't you think I must sometimes long to sit down and rest, to leave off being a she-Arab, if only for half an hour?"

"Was that why you went to Blackgrove?" asked the other, wondering, interested, a little frightened, yet also a little fascinated, by her guest.

"I was in London with a capital of three pounds seventeen shillings," laughed Miss Ross, "and a personalty of five dresses, two bracelets, and Alfred de Musset's poems half-bound, the morning I answered the advertisement that took me to Blackgrove. Can you believe that when I left it yesterday, I might have stayed, if I had chosen, as mistress of the house, the flower garden, the whole establishment, and wife of the worst—well, *one* of the worst men I have ever had to do with? For a moment I hesitated—I own I hesitated; though I knew her so little, I could almost have done it for Helen's sake. Mrs. Lascelles, that girl is an angel, and her father is—is, not to use strong language—*quite the reverse.*"

Mrs. Lascelles was woman enough to defend an absent friend, and the colour rose to her brow while she thought how confidentially they were riding together along the Bragford road not twenty-four hours ago.

"I have known Sir Henry some time," she said, drawing herself up, and blushing yet deeper to reflect that the "some time" was but a very few weeks after all; "I cannot believe him what you describe. You ought not to say such things if you have no proof of them."

"It was to prove them I came here to-day," replied Miss Ross. "It was to prevent a bad man from making a fool of another woman, as he has tried to make a fool of me. Plain speaking, Mrs. Lascelles, but listen to my story before you ring the bell for the footman to turn me out of the house. The first fortnight I was at Blackgrove I never saw the papa at all; and I honestly own I was becoming every day more attached to the eldest girl. It was a quiet, peaceful life; and what with the country air, the sleep, the fresh butter and cream, I began to feel quite strong and healthy. Sometimes I thought I was even getting gentle and almost good; I do believe I could have lived there with Helen, and looked after the younger ones, and gone to bed at ten o'clock, and never wanted change or excitement for years. I don't know—it seems as if it was not *me*, but somebody else, who passed such a calm and happy fortnight in that quiet old country house.

"But I woke up the first day Sir Henry came home. I was looking my best, and he took care I should know he thought so before he had been five minutes in the room. At dinner, too, he was perfectly odious, and the way he helped me to claret, after three hours' acquaintance, was an insult in itself. Can you believe the man wrote me a letter that very night, and had the effrontery to put it on my pincushion himself after I had gone down to breakfast? Such a letter! excusing the

outrageous nature of the whole proceeding, and thus showing he knew perfectly well how badly he was behaving, on the score, if you please, of his age and experience in such matters! He had often fancied himself in love before, he said, but he now knew that he had met his fate for the first and last time. He should leave home, he protested, that same day, and unless I could give him some hope of toleration, if not of forgiveness, should probably never return, for he dreaded my displeasure more even than he loved the very ground I trod on, etc. etc. All in the worst and washiest style, as silly and vulgar as a valentine! But he didn't leave home; for, to my dismay, he appeared at tea-time, on the best possible terms with himself, having been out all the morning with the Bragford hounds, and lunched, as he told us, in very charming society at the Peacock."

A Red Indian displays, I believe, wonderful fortitude and self-command under punishment, but a woman tortured by another woman far surpasses the savage in the calm hypocrisy with which she masks and subdues her pangs. Not a quiver in her voice, not a shadow on her face, betrayed more than natural curiosity, while Mrs. Lascelles inquired, in a tone of perfect unconcern—

"Do you remember, by chance, whether it was the day of the railway accident?"

The day of the railway accident was impressed on her memory, less indeed by the collision, which only damaged a few trucks in a goods-train, than by an interview she held with Sir Henry after luncheon, in which he had given her to understand, as distinctly as he could without saying it in so many words, that amongst all the women of the world there was but one for him, and her name was Rose Lascelles!

"I do remember something about a smash that same day at Bragford Station," answered Miss Ross, "and it seemed to me miraculous that nobody was hurt. I only saw it in the papers next morning, for Sir Henry never mentioned the subject—I suppose he was so full of other matters."

"What do you mean?" said Mrs. Lascelles, getting up to stir the fire, and so turning her face from her companion. "You think I am interested in Sir Henry Hallaton, and you have got something more to tell me about him. Frankly, I *am* interested —to a certain extent. Be as open with me as I am with you, and tell me all you know."

Miss Ross took the pug on her lap, settled herself in a comfortable attitude, and proceeded calmly with her narrative.

"That same evening, when the girls went to bed, Sir Henry detained me, almost by force, in the library. Without the slightest reserve or hesitation, he related all the particulars of his interview that afternoon with yourself. He assured me solemnly that you were avowedly attached to him, and ready at any time to become his wife. He showed me a letter you wrote him, and a ring you had given him to keep."

"He took it to be mended!" interrupted the other with great indignation. "I never gave it him—I insisted on having it back that very day."

"It wouldn't come off," proceeded Miss Ross, "for I own I was malicious enough to ask for it as a proof of his sincerity, and I couldn't help laughing while he tugged and tugged to get it over the joint of his little finger. Then he told me that he had thought of marrying only for the sake of his daughters; that he had looked about him for what the advertisements call 'a suitable person,' and had

selected Mrs. Lascelles—I use his own words—as a ladylike woman, with a good fortune, not at all bad-looking, and thoroughly devoted to himself."

"Upon my word, I am very much obliged to him!" broke in the other, with but little more vehemence, after all, than the occasion demanded. "The man has lied to you like a villain! and his lie is all the more cowardly that it has a certain leaven of truth. Engaged to him I never was; love him I never did; I might have liked him, perhaps, if I hadn't found him out in time, but there is no fear that I shall ever like him now!"

"All this fiction, then," continued Miss Ross, "served as a preamble for a proposal in form to the young lady who had entered his house as companion to his daughters, and whom he was bound, by every manly sentiment, to shelter and protect. I told him so, and he answered that he could in no way fulfil this duty so completely as by making me his wife. Then I laughed at him—I couldn't help it—and he looked so hurt and sad, for he's not a bad actor, that I almost pitied him for the moment, as you do pity people on the stage, though you know it's acting all the time. At last I got sleepy, and wanted to go to bed, so I determined to put him to a real test, knowing perfectly well what would be the result.

"I pretended to soften. I gave him my hand, no more, though he was an old player, and obviously accustomed to consider such concessions the preliminaries of a winning game. Then I told him he ought to know my history; that I had entered his house under false pretences; that long ago, and far away (this is true, Mrs. Lascelles, but let it never again be alluded to by you or me), I had loved and been deceived, and could never care for anyone in that way again. Lastly, I reminded him of his

children, his age (I couldn't resist *that*!) and his position, watching him very narrowly while I shammed a good cry, and sobbed out 'Sir Henry, I am not fit to be your wife.'

"Then I unmasked my man, just as I expected all along. His face brightened, he never dropped my hand, he looked pleased and altogether relieved, while he embarked on a long and fluent dissertation, in which he insisted on the advantages of a protector and a home, on his own merits, on my friendless position, and on the reparation I owed him for his resolution at once to break off with you. Not a word now about matrimony. Oh! I was never deceived in him from the beginning—not for a moment!

"I told him so. 'Do you think,' I said, 'after all I have gone through, after all I have confessed to you, that I have a spark of sentiment, an atom of romance left—that I would trust myself to the tender mercies of any man living, except as his wife?'

"He turned pale, walked to the fire, poked it furiously, and came back with his hands in his pockets, glaring at me like a tiger. 'Then *be* my wife, Miss Ross!' he growled. 'You won't like it, but I'll do my best to make you happier than the others!' He was horridly put out, I saw, so I made him a curtsey, took my candlestick, and marched off to bed. I locked my door, you may be sure, and as he was off early next morning to pay a visit in the neighbourhood, he came and knocked several times to wish me 'Good-bye,' but I pretended to be asleep, and before he returned yesterday I was gone.

"Mrs. Lascelles, you are the only person who was ever good to me without a selfish motive. I

have tried to repay you by putting you on your guard. I can begin my fight with the world where I left off—I rather like it. But think of me kindly sometimes, and try not to forget our drive in the dark to Midcombe Station. I must go now. I don't suppose we shall ever meet again!"

But she didn't go, notwithstanding, for Mrs. Lascelles had many more questions to ask, many more confidences to receive, all tending to the condemnation of her false adorer, Sir Henry Hallaton. Tea-time found the ladies still in earnest conclave, and their intimacy must have been closely cemented, for Miss Ross had already confided to her hostess that her Christian name was Virginie, and that she was familiarly called Jin

CHAPTER III

SIR HENRY HALLATON

WARRIORS of long standing, who, like the Latin poet, have militated, not without success, in many campaigns against the Fair, accept reverses, scars, and even knock-down blows, with a wondrous affectation, at least, of stoicism and unconcern. I have my own opinion on these matters, and hold that the raw recruit, though he may bleed more freely, may make wryer faces over his gashes, thrusts, and gunshot wounds, yet recovers their effects sooner and more completely than the drier and tougher veteran. The heart, I think, is mended less and less easily after each successive breakage. At last, like an old boot that has been patched and cobbled over and over again, it lets in the enemy with a sadly wasteful facility, and the careless Don Juan of twenty finds himself a jealous, fretful, unhappy, yet dotingly devoted Don Alfonso at fifty. There is retribution perhaps even here. A man who lavishes his money in youth, becomes the slave of a guinea in old age. There must be a day of reckoning for waste of time, health, intellect—why not also for a reckless squandering of the affections? Whatever may have been its practice, the moral code of chivalry was, doubtless, of the noblest and the best. Men little know what they throw away in that thoughtless

prostitution of the heart, which they are never taught to consider weak, unmanly, and dishonourable. They abandon the brightest beacon to renown, the surest guide to success, nay, one of the nearest paths to heaven. All these are to be found in an honest love for a pure woman, and all these are bartered every day for the smile of a coquette or the empty vanity of an hour.

When it is too late, there is something very piteous in that longing of human nature for the good and the true, which causes it to accept, with its eyes open, the false and the bad. A second marriage, when the first had been a failure, was described by a well-known wit as the triumph of hope over experience; surely the grasping at a shadow, when the substance has proved unattainable, may be called the anodyne of illusion for despair.

"I only ask to be happy and to have everything my own way," is the unreasonable outcry of youth, embarking on a summer sea with fair wind and hopeful promise, though the golden islands are yet, as they ever will be throughout the voyage, below the horizon, and the safe anchorage of thoughtless childhood is already far on the lee.

"I have a right to be happy!" shouts manhood in stern defiance and rebellion when the waves are rising and the storm darkens around, while he ploughs his way towards his aim by dint of ceaseless toil and weary watches, and heart-breaking efforts that are in themselves unhappiness and pain.

"I deserve to have been happy!" grumbles old age, though the haven is at last in sight; sorrowful but not penitent, regretting with revilings and maledictions, not with remorse and self-reproach, the fair opportunities neglected, the chances lost or thrown away; ready on the vaguest and wildest

encouragement to 'bout ship even now, and, reckless of shrivelled sails and used-up stores, to put out into that dark, dreary, disheartening sea once more.

It is well for man and woman too to have known a deep, engrossing, and sincere affection ; so elevating as to have ennobled their existence with its lustre, so strong as to have swept all rivalry from its path, so prosperous that they have never been driven to seek in paltry imitations some fictitious solace for its loss.

Sir Henry Hallaton had been twice married ; first, in his early youth, when he became the victim of one of those women, happily rare in our English society, who literally go about seeking whom they may devour. She accepted him after a week's acquaintance, and was tired of him in less than a year. Then she ran away with a foreign Count, physically, mentally, and socially far inferior to her husband ; and in moral qualities—at least *then*—not fit to black his boots. Who shall explain these things? Sir Henry had a shot at the Count, and winged him ; but so madly was he in love with the woman by whom he had been thus outraged, that he refused to try for a divorce. Had she not died a few months later, he believed she might have returned to him—and he would have taken her back! This consideration somewhat softened the pain he was weak enough to feel in her loss. Then he married again a lady who was devoted to *him*, this time, and who bore him a family, of which his daughter Helen was the eldest. That he proved a faithful husband to this true and affectionate wife I cannot take upon myself to affirm, but he was good to the children, and especially fond of his eldest. After a few short years he lost his second wife too.

And now began the least excusable part of Sir Henry's life.

He was still handsome, with all the energy and most of the tastes of youth. He was gay, popular, somewhat unscrupulous, and a great favourite with women. The married ones liked him well enough, in all honour, and of such he used to say that they could take care of themselves; but amongst the unmarried, many aspired to legal possession of himself and his home; with these, unless he was much belied, he took cruel advantage of feelings he ought never to have awakened, and hopes he never intended to fulfil.

There were strange stories of Sir Henry's rides with Miss Fanny, and his walks with Miss Violet, of the picnic that got Lady Jane into such a scrape with her aunt, and the disappearance for several more hours than was decorous of a young beauty, once the pride of half a dozen parishes, subsequently ostracised for misdemeanours in which she was far the least erring culprit of the two. Scandals like these, however, neither caused people to shut their doors against the reckless baronet, nor, indeed, brought him into such disrepute as might have been expected with that jury of matrons who constitute the court of appeal for county society, and whose verdict in defiance of all evidence is almost always given in condemnation of the accused. Had it not been for Helen, perhaps Sir Henry in an unguarded moment would have surrendered himself once for all, to recommence his search after happiness in matrimonial fetters, calculated not only to impede his activity, but creating much untoward noise and jingle in his pursuit. The image of his child, I believe, saved him many times from folly, more than once from guilt. The temptation must have

been very great, the seductions more than ordinarily powerful, that could have induced Sir Henry either to abandon his daughter and his home, or to place another in that home, over that daughter's head. His last, and one of his most foolish escapades, had been a sudden infatuation for Miss Ross. He was also not a little ashamed of his discomfiture at her cavalier rejection of his addresses, and masterly retreat from his house.

The morning after her departure Sir Henry sat at breakfast, revolving in his mind many matters of affection and sentiment, which did not, however, seem to affect his spirits or his appetite. He was a late man, and his family, consisting of three daughters, for the only son was abroad with his regiment, generally dispersed to their several occupations before he came down. Only Helen, after she had ordered dinner and set the domestic works of the establishment in motion, habitually paid him a visit to pour out his tea and chat with her papa while he ate. To-day she was later than usual, and her absence gave him time to reflect on his demonstration and its repulse. Strange to say, while he saw the folly of which he would fain have been guilty, and laughed indulgently at his own infatuation, there was a degree of soreness about his failure more galling than that of disappointed fantasy or mere wounded self-love.

"Can it be that I *really* care for this girl?" thought Sir Henry; "and, if so, that I of all men in the world am likely to be baffled in my pursuit? Have I quite lost the art in which I was tolerably perfect twenty, ten, ay, five years ago? and even if I have, is it not worth anything to know that I can feel as I used, and am young in heart and affections still?"

He would have got up and stared in the glass,

deploring, as he often did, the wrinkles about his eyes, the grey hairs in his whiskers, but that Helen coming into the room began to pour out his tea and look after the comforts of his repast.

She was a girl to be proud of, ay, and fond of too. Miss Ross described her beauty graphically enough when she said it was that of an old Greek bas-relief. The features were as regular, the brow as low and wide, the under part of the face slightly prominent, and the mouth, when seen in front, forming that beautiful curve so rarely modelled but in the antique—such a mouth as denotes sensibility, firmness, courage, sympathy, and other noble characteristics of womankind.

In addition to these advantages, Helen possessed what are called Irish eyes—deep, soft, and winning, frank, modest, and full of intellect. I can think of no other epithet to convey their lustre and their charm. They were, probably, blue-grey, like Minerva's, but you never thought of their colour, fringed as they were by curling eyelashes darker than her hair, and surmounted by firm, well-defined eyebrows of a yet deeper shade than either. She was rather tall, too, and handsomely formed, with shapely hands and feet; but the graceful figure suggested a fair amount of strength and energy, nor were you surprised to learn that she could ride, walk, garden, and milk a cow. There were few better waltzers anywhere, and no such skater in the shire. Moreover, though she never confessed to it, I believe she used to play cricket with her brother, and was an undeniable long-stop.

Sir Henry looked fondly in her face, and his heart smote him to think that he should ever have contemplated the possibility of setting any other woman over his daughter's head.

"Letters, Nelly," said he, tossing her over a packet of them to open, while he proceeded with his breakfast. "The old story, of course, county meetings, advertisements for wire-fences, curse them! cheap wines; nothing from Harry—he never writes but when he wants money—to be sure that's nearly every mail — and two or three tradesmen's bills, which you may put in the fire without opening."

"Why don't you *pay* your bills?" said Miss Helen, who was rather fond of lecturing her papa; it was her favourite way of petting him. "You let them run up, and forget all about it; and then, when you want to buy a horse, the money is required for something else. Now, look at me; I keep the house accounts to a fraction, and pay them the first Monday in every month to a minute."

Sir Henry laughed.

"How can I pay your debts and my own too? You spend all my money in soap and sand-paper, you little tyrant, and expect me to find myself in boots, gloves, saddlery, and the common necessaries of life. Nelly, you're the plague of my existence!"

"I wish you would let me manage all these things for you," insisted Miss Nelly with great solemnity; "I'm sure you're cheated, papa, and you are far too generous and open-hearted. Besides, you hate accounts, and I know you pay them often without adding them up. How I like figures! I like managing — I like looking into things — I like having plenty to do."

"You'll have a house of your own to manage some day," answered her father gaily, "and a husband too, you little witch. I'm sure I don't envy him!"

But his face fell while he spoke; for he was thinking, when the fatal time came, what should he

do without his darling, the light and joy and comfort of his home?

Miss Helen blushed. Perhaps she too had not been without her maiden dreams of some such contingency hereafter. Perhaps she had foreshadowed to herself the semblance of a future lord, whom she would tend as fondly and love even more devotedly than papa. Perhaps already that phantom shape had been filled in and coloured, and appeared visibly in the flesh.

"Holloa, young woman!" exclaimed Sir Henry, tossing another letter across the table, "here's something for you! an enormous envelope, stamped with the arms of the Household Cavalry. Bravo, Nell! Have they offered you a cornetcy, or a situation as bandmaster, or what?"

The blush deepened on Helen's face till it spread to the roots of her thick dark hair; but she put back the unopened letter in her father's hand, and, stealing round his chair, leaned on his shoulder, while she stood behind him.

"Read it, papa," said she; "nobody in the world can have anything to say to me that ought not to come to you first."

Again that pang of remorse shot through him, as he remembered his own unworthiness. "What a good girl I have got!" he thought; "and what a poor, irresolute wretch I am! I cannot trust myself for a day! I ought to be better; I wish I could try to be better! Here have I been ready to gamble away my child's position and her everyday comfort for the sake of a pair of black eyes and lanthorn jaws that I had never seen a month ago, that I don't care for half as I do for Nell!—that don't care a brass farthing for me! And I'd do it again, I know, under temptation—that's the worst of

"Read it, papa."

it! Ah! I wish I had led a different life, for Nelly's sake. I wonder if it's too late to begin now?"

Then he read his daughter's letter, a correct and harmless production as could possibly be addressed to a young lady under the immediate supervision of her papa, consisting indeed but of a few choice lines, to express, with much politeness, the writer's intention of "availing himself of Sir Henry's kindness, and of trespassing on his hospitality for a couple of days' hunting the following week," with a studied apology for addressing the daughter of the house, according to her father's express directions, who had feared he might be away from home when the letter arrived; the whole concluding with a vague allusion to a ball of the previous season, which might mean anything, or might not.

"I told him to write to you, Nelly," said Sir Henry, tearing the letter across and throwing it into the waste-paper basket; "it's lucky I did, for I had forgotten all about it. And now I'm not quite sure which of these fellows it is, they're all so alike, and they all ride chestnut horses with great liberality, I must admit. Vanguard, Vanguard — which was Vanguard? The little fellow with light hair, or the stout man who spilt sherry over your dress? I believe I asked them all here next week."

"Nonsense, papa!" replied Helen; "you're thinking of Sir Charles Carter and Mr. Peacock. Captain Vanguard is the gentleman we met at Lady Clearwell's, and who was so civil about his brougham when our carriage got smashed."

"I remember!" exclaimed Sir Henry, suddenly enlightened, "a man with a squint"—

"A squint!" returned Helen indignantly. "Oh, papa! how can you say so? He's got beautiful eyes; at least — I mean" — she added, picking

herself up with some confusion, "he hasn't the slightest vestige of a squint! And you thought him good-looking."

"Did *you* think him good-looking, Nelly?" said her father; "that's more to the purpose."

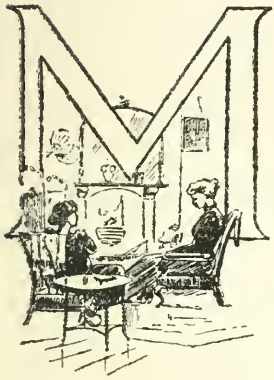
"I never thought about it," answered the girl, tossing her head, yet smiling a little with her deep expressive eyes. "He seemed gentleman-like and good-natured, and you said you wanted to be civil to him; so he'd better come here, I suppose, and I'll see that his room is comfortable and his fire lit —that's *my* department. Now, papa, if you mean to be provoking, I'll go and attend to my own business; I've plenty to do, and you're not to have any more tea. What an hour to have just finished breakfast! Shall I ring?"

"Ring away, Nelly," said her father, putting a cigar in his mouth, and sauntering off for his usual visit to the stables.

But Helen dipped into the waste-paper basket, and extracted therefrom the two torn halves of Frank Vanguard's letter, which she pieced together and perused attentively. Then she folded them carefully in their envelope, also torn, and placed the whole in her apron pocket, ere she rang the bell and sailed off on her daily avocations: from all which I infer that, notwithstanding her denial, she *had* thought about the writer's good looks, and was, at least, perfectly satisfied that his eyes had not the remotest tendency to a squint!

CHAPTER IV

AMAZONS



"MY dear, the Amazons were quite right."

It was Mrs. Lascelles who spoke, sitting in the easiest chair of her boudoir, and listening to an account of those remarkable women, read aloud by Miss Ross. The ladies had not been studying Herodotus, amusing and improbable as are the anecdotes of that gossiping historian, but took their information from an author of later date, less quaint, more voluminous, and perhaps as little to be trusted.

Miss Ross shut her book and yawned.

"I think they should have gone in for man-hating altogether," she replied. "I am dead against half-measures, and I never can see why you shouldn't kick people because they are down!"

"I wish I had always thought so," said the other, with something like a sigh. "We poor women must learn to take care of ourselves. Well, I am wiser now, and really, Jin, I think it's partly owing to you."

Miss Ross was still thinking of the Amazons.

"Why didn't they kill their prisoners at once?" she asked. "It would have been more dignified, and more—what shall I say? more *manly* altogether."

"I think the other plan was better," answered Mrs. Lascelles. "You see, they kept them long enough to make them unhappy, if they had no other motive, and then put them out of the way, just as the captives were beginning to get attached to their conquerors. They don't seem to have minded mutilating themselves; I daresay that was very natural. Jin, I think I should like to have been an Amazon."

"You're too soft-hearted," answered the other. "Now I could condemn a man to death with less compunction than you would show in ordering a child to be whipped. I have no pity for the nobler sex, as they call themselves. 'War to the knife!' that's my motto!"

"I think I have been used badly enough," said Mrs. Lascelles, looking the while extremely prosperous and self-satisfied. "I am sure my early life has not been the happier for my relations with the lords of creation. Two or three false lovers, my dear, and a bad husband, are not calculated to raise one's opinion of the race; but I am not so bitter as you are, by many degrees."

"Heaven forbid!" replied Miss Ross, while a shadow passed across her dark expressive face. "I should be sorry for any woman who could feel as I do; sorrier still if she had learnt the lesson as I did."

She was silent for a few minutes, looking back, as it seemed, with horror and self-aversion, into the depths of a cruel and hideous past; a past that had unsexed and made her what she was now; that had

caused her to originate one of the strangest compacts ever entered into by two women, and enthusiastically to abide by her own share in the agreement.

Mrs. Lascelles and Miss Ross had struck up a firm alliance, offensive and defensive, with the object of persistently carrying out a system of aggressive warfare against the masculine half of the human race. The elder and richer lady had proposed to the younger and poorer, that she should take up her abode with her, and be to her as a sister. In the world, Mrs. Lascelles gave out that Miss Ross was her cousin; nor did a large circle of London acquaintances think it worth while to verify the assumed relationship. They saw two pretty women, living together in a good house, remarkably well dressed, driving the neatest carriage and the truest steppers in London, going out a little, but to good places, and were quite willing to accept their own account of themselves, without making further inquiry. Everybody knew who Mrs. Lascelles was (it would have denoted rustic ignorance not to be aware that she had missed becoming Lady St. Giles), and, after the first week or two, the companion who went about with her was no longer "*a* Miss Ross," but had established her position as "Miss Ross—clever girl, with black eyes—cousin, you know, of dear Rose."

So these two might be seen in the Park twice a week; at the opera once; occasionally at a ball; more frequently at those unaccountable functions called drums, where hundreds of people congregate in a space intended for tens, and the world seems engaged, somewhat wearily and with customary ill success, in looking about for its wife.

But it was Miss Ross who had struck out the

happy idea on which hung the whole strength and motive of the alliance.

She it was who suggested, that at all times, and under all conditions, as much harm should be done to the peace of mind of every man within reach as could be accomplished by two fascinating women, with all the advantages of good fortune, good looks, good taste, and good position.

"You've got the money, dear," said she to her patroness, "and most of the beauty in my opinion, the friends, the foothold, and the rest of it; but, I think, I've got the energy and the obstinacy, and my share of the brains; above all, the *rancour* that can carry us through any opposition in the world!"

So they started on the warpath at once, even before Easter; and a very pleasant filibustering expedition they made of it. Not many scalps were taken perhaps at first; but the defences of the white man were examined and broken through, his habits studied, his weapons blunted, his mode of strategy laid bare. By the middle of May, sundry Pale-Faces were going about with strange sensations under their waistcoats, that only wanted a little chafing to become serious disease of the heart. The aggravation was sure to follow, else wherefore were dresses of exquisite fabric constructed, gloves and bonnets sent home, coils of fragrant hair laid fold on fold, smooth, shining, and insidious as the involutions of the great Serpent himself? It was difficult to say which of these two Amazons could boast the highest score of victims. Perhaps Mrs. Lascelles proved most successful in the massacre of middle-aged adorers, while young boys and old gentlemen fell prostrate without effort, willing captives to the devilry and seductions of Miss Ross.

Amongst the eldest of these, and the wisest, in his own opinion, was a certain Mr. Groves, a relative by marriage of Mrs. Lascelles, who persisted in calling him Uncle Joseph, a name by which he soon became known in the circle of her intimates. This gentleman, at a mature period of life when years are counted by scores, and romance is supposed to have made way for comfort and self-indulgence, found his defences suddenly exposed to the merciless attacks of Miss Ross. He liked it uncommonly at first, flattering himself that at his age flirtation was a harmless and pleasing excitement, which he could leave off when it became oppressive or inconvenient, and that, if worst came to worst, he was in good hands—the girl seemed so attached to him, so confiding, so sincere! Uncle Joseph used to rub his bald head in his cooler moments, and wonder fully as much at her as himself; but with the lapse of years, he had at least learned that it was not well to analyse our pleasures too minutely; and he generally summed up with the philosophical reflection that there was no accounting for taste. If the girl liked a man old enough to be her father, why, it only showed she was a girl of sense, who knew the world, "Ay, and more than that, sir, a girl who knows her own mind!"

By degrees, however, Uncle Joseph, having, it is to be presumed, forgotten the tender experiences of youth, was surprised to find his habits altered, his snuff-box put aside, his after-dinner slumbers abolished, nay, the fashion of his garments derided, his very tailor changed, and tyrannical exception taken to the thickness of his boots. He kicked stoutly at first, but without avail. He was never comfortable now, seldom happy. The clubs and

haunts he had once delighted to frequent knew him no more, and he had taken to wander about the Park like a restless spirit, amongst boys who might have been his grandsons, disappointed, as it would seem, in a vague search for some object, which yet he never really expected to find.

So altered was the man, that he actually consulted an eminent hairdresser on the propriety of setting up a wig!

"Don't be late, dear, to-night," said Mrs. Lascelles, waking up from a fit of musing, possibly on the habits of the Amazons; "there's nobody coming, I think, but Uncle Joseph, and he hates waiting for dinner. Perhaps he's still more fidgety when he is waiting for you."

In Miss Ross's black eyes rose a sparkle that denoted intense love of mischief, rather than gratified vanity or demure self-applause.

"He does wait for me, nevertheless, very often," she answered; "and I don't let him off because he hates it, you may be sure. Do you remember him that night at the French play? Didn't he get savage? And wasn't it fun?"

Mrs. Lascelles laughed.

"You never spare him, Jin; that you must allow."

"I spare nobody!" answered the other, and the dark eyes glittered fiercely.

Her friend looked at her with more than common interest, and something of pity no less than curiosity in her face.

"What makes you so wild, Jin," said she, "so wicked, so merciless, so unlike other people? I love you dearly, as you know, because I do believe you love me. But why should you hate everybody else? Above all, why are you so bitter, so unkind,

so utterly without heart, towards those who show a regard for yourself? It seems to me that directly a man betrays the slightest interest in you, down he goes in the Black List, and you pitch into him without compunction or remorse."

"Shall I make a clean breast of it?" said Miss Ross, drawing her chair near her friend. "You have often heard me say what a wretched childhood mine was, what an unhappy youth; but I have never told even *you* of the one crowning sorrow of my life, the one outrage that turned my few good impulses and instincts into malice, hatred, and all uncharitableness. As a child, I had no parents, no relations. I was brought up by a stern old woman in black, whom I had been taught to call Aunty, but who was careful to impress on me, nevertheless, that I was not her niece; and I had no playmates nor companions of my own age. I could have clung very fondly to anything that showed interest in me or loved me. I know it, because when I was taken across the Channel to school at Dieppe, I made acquaintance with the steward's dog in the steamer, and I never shall forget the wrench of parting with that friend of six hours' standing, nor the look in his meek brown eyes when I kissed him and wished him good-bye. I remember I cried for two hours, and Aunty thought it was at parting with her. She scolded me without pity; but even then I was wise enough to know she would have reviled me still more bitterly had I told her the truth. How I hated that school at Dieppe, the *café au lait*, the long rolls of bread, the *bouilli*, and the fast-days. The lessons I didn't so much mind, but the 'recreations,' as they called them, I thought would have driven me mad! I was quite a little girl when I went

there, but nobody petted me, nor seemed to care one snap of the fingers whether I was dead or alive; though they said I was pretty, I don't think I could have been what is called a taking child. I was often punished, too, and always more or less in disgrace for insubordination, because I lifted up my young voice and protested against the injustice to which we were daily victims. The school consisted of French and English girls. I liked the latter least; they were the most prejudiced and overbearing, affecting airs of superiority, and calling the former foreigners in their own country!

"When I left Dieppe and was removed to a convent in Paris everybody seemed glad, and I was delighted to go myself.

"Oh, Rose, you have never been in a convent! Thank your stars, my dear, or your gods, if you have any; and pray that you never may be. The discipline, the dulness, the wearisome routine, made one feel like a wild beast in a cage. I think I should have torn somebody in pieces if I had stayed. There was nothing to see, nothing to do, and nothing to learn. Though I was such a little rebel, I had neither been stupid nor idle at school, and there was little they taught in the convent, except needlework, that I didn't know fully better than my instructors. So I ran away. I'm ashamed to tell you how I managed it—what lies I told, what feelings I simulated, what smiles I lavished to induce a young man, whom I had only seen three times and spoken with twice, to assist me in my flight. He called it *un enlèvement*; but I think I managed all the details, and had therefore the less difficulty in giving him the slip within an hour of my escape from prison. He was a *friseur*, I believe. He told me he was an artist. I certainly shouldn't

have known him again in a week's time, but he was useful to me, and I think he said his name was Adolphe.

"No friends—no money. A runaway schoolgirl, and loose in the streets of Paris. Can you wonder that my wits are sharpened, my opinions somewhat advanced? I was self-reliant, however, and had no intention of starving, so I pawned a black silk jacket of my own, and a bracelet Adolphe had lately given me. I regret to say the latter ornament fetched but a few francs. I had capital enough now to keep me a few days, and felt that I could afford to make my own bargain with an employer, whatever might be the task or the terms.

"Perhaps it was because I could do without it for the moment, that I obtained an engagement the same day to sing at one of the *cafés chantants* that abound in the outskirts of Paris. In a low dress, at sixteen, singing to two hundred people I had never seen before, I give you my word I wasn't the least shy. Truth to tell, my blood was up. I had detected in the manager's politeness, and the readiness with which he met my terms, something of that predatory tendency which I had already learned from books, from reflection, from the experience of others, affects the dealings of men towards ourselves. I was ten times better in defence, I knew, than he could be in attack; and I felt a fierce pleasure in pondering how I could turn his own weapons against himself.

"So I ran through a succession of shakes, and squeals, and shrieks, and sometimes sang false, to the delight of an enthusiastic audience and my own intense gratification. One man never took his eyes off me; and, somehow, before I had finished my

third or fourth bar, I found I had forgotten manager, self, and company, and was singing to this man alone. When I went back at night to the bare little room I had hired during the afternoon, shall I confess to you that his face haunted me in the dark? and I dreamt of him—I did, upon my word—though I was so tired I fell dead asleep the instant I lay down."

"My dear, you had fallen in love," observed her listener.

"No, I hadn't," answered the other; "at least, not then. Next day I found a note and a bouquet from the manager. I did wish for a moment it had been from somebody else; but it proved to me, at least, I was admired by an old fool who might have been my grandfather, and so my vanity should have been gratified, but it only made me savage and irritable. I don't think I ever liked people one bit because they liked me!

"That evening the same man was there to hear me sing again. I confess my heart gave a jump when I saw him, and I knew that *he* knew it! He never applauded but once, and he shook his head whenever I made a false note. What pains I took, and how pleased I was when he said 'Bravo!' out loud as I made my curtsey! I *was* in love with him that night when I went to bed, and felt I had a right to dream of him as much as ever I liked.

"It is not difficult to make acquaintance with a friendless girl singing for bread in a place like Paris. I thought it very hard that a whole week should pass without his speaking to me, though I saw him every night, always staring, and always in the same place. Of course the time came at last, and when I had him all to myself on two chairs, with a *deux-sous* newspaper, in the Tuileries gardens, I did feel

that life was something to enjoy, to revel in, to be grateful for. Mrs. Lascelles, I shall never be near heaven now, but I think I was then. I was so happy that it made me good.

"I wonder if he knew what he was doing. Sometimes I think men are often brutes only because they are fools. We were married, though. I protest to you solemnly, as I am a living woman, we were married in a church! I took his name, such as it was, and when next I sang they put me in the bills as Madame Picquard. He did not like me to leave off my profession, he said, and I would have gone out willingly with a rake and a basket to earn my day's wages as a scavenger in the streets if he had only said it was a pleasant life.

"We were not rich, though he always seemed to have plenty of money. I lived in a very modest apartment, and I used to think I saw less of my husband after he was my husband. I imagine this is sometimes the case, but it grieved me then. I was even fool enough to cry about it. Fancy my crying with nothing to gain, and nobody to dry my eyes! A good joke, isn't it? But we have changed all that. How I used to laugh at his French! He said he was an Alsatian, that was why it was so bad. I never heard him speak English but once. I was nearly run over by a *fiacre*, and he said, 'Take care, dear!' just as you or I might. His mother, he told me, had been an Englishwoman, but he scarcely knew another word of the language.

"Soon after this my boy was born. Such a noble little fellow, Mrs. Lascelles—so strong, so handsome, with beautiful little hands and finger-nails, as perfect as a model. My darling boy! He knew me, I am sure he did, when he was ten days old, and—and—it's nonsense, of course, and they hate

one when they're grown up. But I wasn't such a bad mother to him after all!

"Did I tell you my husband's name was Achille? Well, Achille was very good to me at first—sending in flowers, and things for baby, and coming to see me every day. To be sure, the doctor wouldn't let him stay above five minutes. I was very happy, and looked forward to getting well and singing again, and working hard at home and abroad for the comfort of my husband and child.

"But I didn't get well. I was very young, you know, and it was weeks before I was able to walk into the next room, so that I couldn't accompany my husband anywhere out of doors, and I daresay I was a sadly stupid companion in the house. Perhaps that was why he got tired of me. How can I tell? or what does it signify? It seems as if all these things had happened a hundred years ago. What a fuss people make about their feelings and their affections, and so on! What is the good of them after all? and how long do they last?

"Achille hadn't been to see me for a week, when one day the nurse came in, and said a gentleman was waiting outside, and wished to know if he might be admitted. I was on the sofa with baby on my lap, and felt stronger than usual of late, so I said 'Certainly,' when, behold, enter my friend the manager, bearing an enormous bouquet, profuse in civilities, congratulations, compliments, and more hateful than ever; he wanted to kiss baby, who was frightened at him,—no wonder,—and drew his chair so close to my sofa that I should have liked to box his ears on the spot.

"He hadn't been five minutes in the room before he made a declaration of love, which I resented with considerable energy; finally, as a last resource,

threatening to acquaint my husband with his insolence, who, I said, should kick him from one end of the Boulevard to the other. I shall never forget the hateful laugh with which he received my menace.

"'Is madame aware,' said he, 'that monsieur has left Paris; that I am his chosen friend and comrade; that I have regulated his affairs to the last; that he wishes me to protect madame as he would himself, and to stand in the place of a father to his child?'

"Then he put a letter in my hand, which he kissed at the same time with much effusion, and, walking to the other end of the room, buried himself in the *Charivari*, while I read.

"Such a letter, Mrs. Lascelles! need I tell you what it all meant? Need I tell you that Achille was base, treacherous, cowardly, shameless? *Enfin*, that he was a *man*! He said I had no legal claim on him; that our marriage was a sham; that we had lived pleasantly enough for a time, but of course this could not go on for ever, and that I could hardly expect his future—*his* future!—I should like to know what he had done with mine!—to be sacrificed to a *liaison*, however romantic, of a few months' standing. He had left funds, he went on to say, at my disposal, in the hands of his good friend the manager, with whom, as he had made a point of arranging, I could place myself advantageously at once. With regard to the boy, he added, I must consult my own feelings; but so long as a noble institution was supported by the State for the reception of *enfants trouvés*, he could not charge himself with the support of us both. The manager was an excellent man, in the prime of life, and he wished me much happiness in the successful career

in which, thanks to his care and provision, I could now embark.

"I suppose I am not like other women: I neither fainted, nor raved, nor burst into fits of weeping, nor sat as they do on the stage, white and motionless, turned to stone. All in a moment I seemed to have grown quite cool and composed, and as strong as a milkmaid. My instinct was doubtless to hit again. Achille might be out of reach, but here was his confederate, disarmed, and open to a blow. Some intuitive consciousness, possessed, I believe, only by women, taught me that this man was in my power. I determined he should know what that meant before I had done with him.

"The crackling of the letter, as I refolded it, brought him back to my side. He took my hand and kissed it once more. I did not withdraw it now.

"'I was quite prepared for this,' I said quietly, 'as, of course, you know. My husband and I have been on bad terms for some time. You must be very much in his confidence, however, if he has told you *why*—that is my affair, so is the question of money; in that matter he has behaved well, but I cannot take it.'

"His fat, heavy face gleamed with absolute delight.

"'You cannot take it!' he repeated; 'and why?'

"'Because I have no claim on him as a wife; because, morally, he is not my husband; because women have sentiments, affections, *amour propre*, egoism, if you will; *enfin*, because I love another.'

"But I was careful, you may be sure, not to tell him who that other was. Before he quitted me

that afternoon he had persuaded me, nothing loath, to accept the pittance left by my good-for-nothing husband; though a fortnight afterwards, having been to see me every day, he was still in torments about the unknown object, growing always more and more infatuated, in a way that would have been ludicrous had it not been simply contemptible.

"I doled him out little morsels of encouragement; I accepted from him valuable presents, and even sums of money; I tantalised, irritated, and provoked him with the ingenuity of a fiend. I shuddered when he came near me, yet I let him kiss my face once,—my baby's *never*! At last I gave way, with a great storm of sobs and emotion, made my confession, whispered that he, and he alone, had been the mysterious object; that I had cared for him from the first; that to him was owing my coldness towards my husband, our estrangement, and eventual separation. Finally, I promised to meet him the very next morning, never more to part; and within six hours my baby and I were established, bag and baggage, in the train for Lyons; nor have I ever seen my fat friend from that day to this.

"Except a flower I once gave him in exchange for a Spanish fan, I don't think he got anything out of our acquaintance but, as Hamlet says, 'the shame and the odd hits.'

"I wasn't altogether unhappy at Lyons. Baby was my constant companion; and, so long as my money lasted, I was contented enough only to wash and nurse him, and see him grow, and teach him to say 'mamma.' It was a long while before I gained sufficient strength to sing again, and in the meantime I picked up a few francs by sitting to artists for a model, but I didn't like it. If I took baby, I couldn't

keep him quiet; and a painting room was so bad for him. If I left him at home, I always expected to find something dreadful had happened when I came back. I was advised to put him out to nurse. Though I couldn't bear to part with my boy, I saw that, sooner or later, it must come to this; but he was over two years old before I made up my mind.

"They had offered me a six weeks' engagement at Avignon. My voice had come back, the terms were good, it looked likely to lead to something better, and I accepted eagerly.

"There was low fever then prevalent in that town. I could not take little Gustave to a hot-bed of sickness, so I left him in charge of a kind, motherly woman, who had a child of her own, in a healthy part of Lyons, only too near the river.

"Poor little darling! I am sure he knew I was going away, for he set up a dreadful howl when I put him down. It seems silly enough, but I suppose I wasn't properly trained then, for I could have howled too with all my heart.

"What a long six weeks it was! And, after all, I came back before the close of my engagement, and forfeited half my salary. There had been floods as usual in Lyons, the poor woman I had left him with couldn't write, and I was getting uneasy about my boy.

"Oh, Mrs. Lascelles, when I returned there I couldn't find him! The cottage I left him in had been swept away when the river rose. No trace even remained of the quiet little street. The authorities had done all in their power for hundreds of ruined families; what was one poor woman and a two-years-old child amongst all those sufferers! I searched the markets, the streets, the hospitals. I haunted the police-office; I offered everything I

possessed, freely, everything! for tidings of my boy. One commissary of police was especially kind and considerate, but even he let out at last that I was well rid of my child! Madame, as he expressed it, so young, so handsome, with such talents, so *sympathique* with himself! And this was a *man*, my dear, not a brute—at least, not more a brute than the rest!

"He it was who found out for me that the poor woman was drowned with whom I had left my boy; there was no clue to the fate of her child nor of mine. *Monsieur le commissaire*, with supreme good taste, chose the hour in which he made me this communication, to couple with it a proposal that did not increase my respect for himself or his sex. You may imagine I did not even yet relax my endeavours to find out something certain about my boy. I went to the mayor—the *préfet*; in my desolation, I even wrote to my old admirer, the manager, in Paris. On all sides I met with the same treatment; civility, compliment, egoism, and utter heartlessness. In time I came to think that there was not only nothing new, but nothing good, under the sun. If I were romantic I should say I was a tigress robbed of her cub; as I am only practical, I call myself simply a woman of the world, whom the world has hardened; cunning, because deceived; pitiless, because ill-treated; heartless, because *désillusionée*. You have taken me in, and tamed me for a time, but nothing will change my nature now.

"The rest of my history you know; the depths to which I sank, the meannesses of which I was capable, the hypocrisy that re-established me in a station of respectability, and swindled people out of such recommendations as the one that enabled me to make a fool of Sir Henry Hallaton. As I told you

before, my motto now is, 'War to the knife!' I might add, 'Woe to the vanquished!'"

The tears stood in her listener's blue eyes more than once during this strange recital; but Mrs. Lascelles brightened up when it was over, and pointed to the clock with a light laugh—

"Go and put your armour on, my dear," said she, "and bid your maid look to the joints of your harness. We fight to-night in *champ clos*, and you have two champions to encounter, both eager for the fray!"

Miss Ross smiled—

"Let the best man win!" she answered. "He may find to-night that the 'latter end of a feast' is not at all unlike 'the beginning of a fray'!"

CHAPTER V

À OUTRANCE

NO Amazon, I imagine, in the experience of Herodotus, Sir Walter Raleigh, or our own, was ever known to be careless of her weapons, suffering them to grow blunt from neglect or rusty from disuse. The boar whets his tusks, the stag sharpens his antlers; the nobler beasts of chase are not dependent for safety on flight alone; and shall not woman study how she can best bring to perfection that armour with which nature provides her for attack, defence, and eventual capture of her prey?

Brighter or more accomplished warriors never entered lists than the two now sitting in the drawing-room at No. 40: cool, fragrant, diaphanous; redoubtable in that style of beauty which is so enhanced and set off by art.

To these, enter a young gentleman, hot, shy, bewildered; who has followed into the room a name not the least like his own, with considerable trepidation; hardly clear if he is on his head or his heels and, although worshipping the very pattern of the carpet on which one of these divinities treads, yet conscious, in his heart of hearts, that it would be unspeakable relief to wake up and find himself three-quarters of a mile off at his club.

Mr. Goldthred, whose announcement by a pompous butler as "Mr. Gotobed" had not served

to increase his confidence, was by no means a bold person in general society, and possessed, indeed, as little of that native dignity they call "cheek," as any of the rising generation with whom it was his habit to associate; but on the present occasion he felt nervous to an unusual degree, because, alas! he had fallen in love with a woman older, cleverer, more experienced, and altogether of higher calibre than himself.

He had come early, half hoping to find her alone, yet was it a relief to be spared the ordeal of a *tête-à-tête* that seemed so delightful in fancy. Of course, being her utter bond-slave, he paid his homage to Mrs. Lascelles with ludicrous stiffness, and blundered at once into an inconsequent conversation with Miss Ross. That syren took pity on his embarrassment —the pity a cat takes on a mouse. It amused her to mark the poor youth's efforts to seem at ease, his uncomfortable contortions, his wandering replies, and the timid glances he cast on the hem of his conqueror's garment, who would willingly have met him half-way, had he only gone up and flirted with her in good earnest.

"We haven't seen you for ages, Mr. Goldthred. What have you been doing? Where have you been hiding? Rose and I were talking about you this very afternoon."

How he wished he too might call his goddess "Rose"; but she had been talking about him, blessed thought! that very day. His heart was in his throat, and he murmured something about "French play."

"You can't have been at the French play day and night," laughed Miss Ross; "but I'm not going to cross-examine you. Besides, you weren't asked here to flirt with *me*. I've got my own

young man coming, and he's hideously jealous. I hear him now coughing on the stairs! Only us four. It's a small party. We shall find each other very stupid, I daresay."

Gathering encouragement, no doubt, from this supposition, and emboldened by a fresh arrival, Mr. Goldthred stole a glance in his idol's face while she rose to welcome Uncle Joseph. The blue eyes rested on their worshipper very kindly for about half a second. But that half-second did his business as effectually as half an hour. If Uncle Joseph was also shy, greater age, wisdom, and corpulence rendered him more capable of concealing such embarrassment. He shook his hostess cordially by the hand; he told Miss Ross she looked like a China rose, a flower of which he had formed some vague conception, far removed from reality; and announced that he had spent his day in the City, and was very hungry—more like a man in business than a man in love. This gentleman took down Miss Ross, Mrs. Lascelles followed with young Goldthred, leaning more weight on his arm than the steepness of the stairs seemed to necessitate. He wished the journey twice as long, and for half a minute was half persuaded he felt happy!

I am sorry I cannot furnish the bill of fare; Uncle Joseph put it in his pocket. It was a way he had, after perusing it solemnly through a pair of gold eye-glasses, with the intention of working it deliberately to the end.

A dinner organised for an express purpose is generally a failure. On the present occasion there was no particular object to be gained beyond the general discomfiture of two unoffending males, and it went on merrily enough. Drinking is, no doubt, conducive to sentiment; but eating has, I think, a

contrary tendency, and should never be mixed up with the affections. Uncle Joseph, though far gone, had not yet lost enough heart to weaken his appetite, and young Goldthred helped himself to everything with the indiscriminate and indecent carelessness of a man under thirty. The ladies pecked and sipped and simpered, yet managed to take a fair share of provender on board; and after champagne had been twice round, the party were thoroughly satisfied with themselves, and with each other. Even Goldthred mustered courage enough to carry on the siege, and began making up for lost time. Her fish was so lively, Mrs. Lascelles thought well to wind in a few yards of line.

"Either you are very romantic, Mr. Goldthred," she objected, "or else you don't mean us to believe what you say."

"I wish *you* to believe it," he answered, lowering his voice and blushing, really blushing, though he was a man, "and—and—I never used to be romantic till I came here."

"It's in the air, I suppose," she answered, laughing, "and we shall all catch it in turn—I hope it isn't painful! I sometimes think it must be, unless one has it in the mildest form. We'll ask Miss Ross. Jin, dear, Mr. Goldthred wants to know if you've any romance about you. I tell him I don't think you've an atom."

"How can you say so!" exclaimed Miss Ross. "Don't you know my especial weakness? Can't anybody see I'm heart all over?"

Uncle Joseph looked up from his cutlet, masticating steadily the while, and his grave eyes rested on the dark, meaning face of the lady by his side. Their gaze indicated surprise, incredulity, and the least touch of scorn.

She was a beautiful fighter, she had practised so much, and knew exactly when and how to return. Shooting one reproachful glance from her large dark eyes full into his own, under cover of the others' voices she murmured two words—"Strangers yet!"

It was the title of a song she sang to him only the day before in the boudoir; a song into which she put all the wild, tender pathos of her flexible and expressive voice. Its burden had been ringing in his ears half an hour ago, while he dressed for dinner.

The round, you see, was a short one; but Uncle Joseph caught it heavily and went down! To borrow the language of the prize-ring—"First blood for Miss Ross."

He came up smiling, nevertheless, and finished his glass of champagne.

"I wish you were a little plainer, Miss Ross. I'm not paying you a compliment, or I should say you could easily afford to be a great deal plainer than you are. I mean what I say."

"And I mean what I say too—sometimes," she whispered, drooping her thick black eyelashes. "I don't think I should like to be thought so very plain by *you*."

Uncle Joseph went down again, having received, I fancy, no less punishment in this round than the last.

Meanwhile young Goldthred, fortified by refreshment, and further stimulated by the interest Mrs. Lascelles either felt or affected, embarked on a touching recital of his pursuits, belongings, and general private history. He described in turn, and with strict attention to details, his schooner, his tax-cart, and his poodle; enlarging on the trim and

rigging of the first, the varnish of the second, the elaborate shaving of the third—and, indeed, almost soared into eloquence about his dog.

"It shows he has a good heart," thought the listener; "but none the less must he take his punishment like the rest!"

With a little more champagne he glided, by an easy transition, into his possessions, his expectations, his prospects in general; why he had done well in "Spanish," what a mess he had made of "Peruvians," the advantage of early information about American politics, and how nearly he had missed a great-uncle's munificent bequest by exposing his ignorance of the French *Credit Mobilier*. He was not quite a fool, however, and stopped himself with a laugh.

"What a bore you will think me, Mrs. Lascelles," said he. "One is so apt to fancy everybody is interested in what one cares for oneself."

"I am," she answered, with her brightest, kindest look. "I always want to know everything about people I like. When they leave the stage I follow them in fancy behind the scenes, and I do think I should feel hurt if I believed they were really so different without their rouge, wigs, padding, and false calves."

"It's not out of sight, out of mind, with you, eh?" observed the young gentleman, in considerable trepidation. To do him justice, he saw his opportunity, but could make no more of it than the above.

"Do you think it is?" she returned. "And what would one be worth if it was? How little people know each other. We all seem to go about with masks for faces. I daresay mine is like the rest, but I would take it off in a minute if I was asked."

Another opening for Goldthred. He felt full of sentiment, up to his eyelids; was, indeed, choking with it, but somehow it wouldn't come out.

"I've never been to a regular masquerade," said he simply; "I should think it was capital fun."

Miss Ross, whom nothing escaped, whatever she had on hand, saw his discomfiture, and came to the rescue

"You're at one every day of your life," she broke in. "Rose is quite right. Nobody speaks the whole truth, except Mr. Groves, who has just told me I'm hideous. You know you did, and you think you're a capital judge. I shall not forgive you till after coffee. I must say I can't agree with Rose about one's friends. As for mine, with a few brilliant exceptions, the less I see of them the better I like it."

"If that's the case, Jin, we'll go upstairs," said the hostess, rising slowly and gracefully, as she fastened the last button of her glove. "Uncle Joseph," she added, with her sweetest smile, "you're at home, you know. You must take care of Mr. Goldthred;" and so swept out, keeping the blue eyes Goldthred so admired steadily averted from his eager face. He returned to the table after shutting the door quite crestfallen and disappointed. He had counted on one more look to carry him through the tedious half-hour that must intervene ere he could see her again, and she probably knew this as well as he did. Ladies sometimes are exceedingly liberal of such small encouragements; sometimes, as if from mere caprice, withhold them altogether. No doubt they adapt their treatment to the symptoms shown by the sufferer.

It was a long half-hour for the two gentlemen thus left over their dessert, without a subject

of interest in common. Uncle Joseph's mature prudence, over-reaching itself, mistrusted a single lady's cellar, and he stuck faithfully to pale sherry; while Goldthred, with youthful temerity, dashed boldly at the claret, and was rewarded by finding an exceedingly sound and fragrant vintage. Not that he knew the least what he was drinking, but swallowed sweetmeats and filled bumpers with a nervous impatience for release, that lengthened every minute into ten. The other, wondering why his relative had asked this guest to dinner, and what merit she could see in him, thought him the stupidest young man he had ever come across, and was sorely tempted to tell him so.

They tried the usual topics in vain—the instability of the Government, the good looks of the Princess, the disgraceful uncertainty of the weather. At last, Goldthred, driven to despair, propounded the comprehensive question, "What were they doing to-day in the City?" and the companions got on better after so suggestive an inquiry.

Uncle Joseph delivered his opinions solemnly on certain doubtful securities; the younger man made a shrewd observation concerning his own investments. Obviously they had in one respect a similarity of tastes, and each found his dislike of the other decreasing every moment. Uncle Joseph even began to debate in his own mind whether he ought not to ask his new acquaintance to dinner. He had drunk five glasses of sherry, and I think one more would have settled the point; but the welcome moment of release chimed out with the half-hour from a clock on the chimney-piece, so, flinging down his napkin, he pointed to the empty claret-jug, and suggested they should proceed upstairs.

There was nothing Goldthred desired so much. He pulled his tie straight—it had a tendency to get under his left ear—bounced into the passage, whisked his hat off the hall-table, weathered the butler coming out with tea, and was already engaged with the enemy, before Uncle Joseph had fairly extricated himself from the dining-room.

The ladies were wrapped in silence; they generally are when the men come up after dinner. They had disposed themselves also very judiciously. Mrs. Lacelles sat at the open window, not quite in the room, not quite on the balcony. Jin, with considerable forethought, had entrenched herself in a corner near the pianoforte, free from draughts. The soft mellow lamplight threw a very becoming lustre on those bewitching individuals. Each knew she was looking well, and it made her look better still. After a bottle of sound claret, it was not to be expected that a man should enact "his grandsire cut in alabaster" in such company. Goldthred, armed with a flat hat and a coffee-cup, advanced in tolerably good order to the attack.

It was a fine night even in London. The moon sailed broad and bright in a clear, fathomless sky. The very gas-lamps, studding street and square, through the flickering leaves of spring, flashed out a diabolical enchantment of their own, half revelry, half romance. The scent of geraniums and mignonette stole with a soft, intoxicating fragrance on the rebellious senses; and a German band, round the corner, was playing a seductive measure of love and languor and lawlessness from the last new opera. Mrs. Lascelles, moving out on the balcony, drank in the soft night air with a deep-drawn breath that was almost a sigh. Young Goldthred followed as

the medium follows the mesmerist, the bird the rattlesnake. His heart beat fast, and the coffee-cup clattered in his hand. Time and scene were adapted, no doubt, for sentiment, especially out of doors.

It is done every day, and all day long. Also, perhaps, more effectually still on nights like these. Pull a man's purse, madam, from his waistcoat-pocket, and although you have Iago's authority for considering it trash, you may find yourself picking oakum as a first consequence, and may finish, in due course, at the penitentiary; but dive those pretty fingers a thought deeper, take his heart scientifically out of his pericardium, or wherever he keeps it, squeeze it, drain it, rinse it quite dry, return him the shrivelled fragments, with a curtsey, and a "Thank you kindly, sir," you will receive applause from the bystanders, and hearty approbation from the world in general for your skill.

So Mrs. Lascelles, stifling all compunction, played out the pretty game. They leaned over the balcony, side by side; they smelt the mignonette, with their heads very close together; they looked at the moon, and into each other's eyes, and down on the street, where a faded figure, in torn shawl and tawdry bonnet, flitted past, to be lost in the shadow of darkness farther on; sighing, smiling, whispering, till the boy's blood surged madly to his brain; and the woman, despite of craft, science, and experience, felt that she must practise all her self-command not to be softer and kinder, if only for a moment, than she desired.

Her white cool hand lay on the edge of the mignonette box. He covered it with his own. In another moment he would have seized and pressed it, hungrily, rapturously, to his lips. She rose just

Uncle Joseph sat spell-bound by the Syren

in time, and came full into the lamplight from within.

"What nonsense we have been talking!" she exclaimed with a laugh; "and what a deal of sentiment! It is nice to talk nonsense sometimes, and sentiment too, but a little goes a long way."

He was hurt, and, not being a woman, showed it.

"I am sorry," said he gloomily; "I thought you liked it."

She did not want to snub him too much.

"So I do," she answered, stepping back into the drawing-room, "when it's the real thing, sweet and strong, little and good. Come and listen to Jin's song; it's better for you than flirting in the dark on the balcony."

Though mocking and mischievous, there was yet something kind and playful in her tone; he felt quite happy again as he followed her in, meekly, like a lamb to the slaughter.

Miss Ross, although she had taken up a position more adapted to the comfort of an elderly and rheumatic admirer, did not suffer the shining hour to pass away unimproved. She possessed a full, sweet voice, of rare compass, and was a thorough mistress of the musical art, accompanying her own or other people's songs with equal taste and skill. Uncle Joseph, in an arm-chair, with a hand on each knee, sat spellbound by the syren,—eyes, ears, and mouth wide open, under the influence of her strains.

It was but a simple ditty of which she gave him the benefit, yet neither nature nor art were spared to render it as destructive as she could. He had never heard it before; but, as he expressed entire

approval of its rhythm, and asked for it again, I feel justified in giving it here. She called it—

OVER THE WATER.

"I stand on the brink of the river,
The river that runs to the sea;
The fears of a maid I forgive her,
And bid her come over to me.
She knows that her lover is waiting,
She's longing his darling to be,
And spring is the season of mating,
But—she dares not come over to thee!

I have jewels and gold without measure;
I have mountain and meadow and sea;
I have store of possessions and treasure,
All wasting and spoiling for thee.
Her heart is well worthy the winning,
But Love is a gift of the free,
And she vowed from the very beginning,
She'd never come over to thee.

Then lonely I'll wed with my sorrow—
Dead branch on a desolate tree—
My night have no hope of a morrow,
Unless she come over to me.
Love takes no denial, and pity
Is love in a second degree,
So long ere I'd ended my ditty,
The maiden came over to me!"

The two guests left No. 40 together, and parted at the end of the street; the junior betaking himself to his cigar, the senior to his whist. Each carried away with him a vague idea that he had spent an evening in Paradise. Which of the two had been made the greater fool of, it is not my province to decide; but I have some recollection of an old couplet in the West of England to the following effect:—

"Young man's love soon blazeth and is done,
Old man's love burneth to the bone."

CHAPTER VI

TERRARUM DOMINOS

"NEAR side, man! the near side! Take it up two holes—that'll do. Sit tight behind!"

The leaders cringed and winced against their bars. One wheeler, accepting under protest a wipe with the double thong across his quarters, threw himself widely off the pole; the other, butting like a goat, bounced into his collar; and so, starting the whole coach, the painted, varnished, glittering toy passed on, in clouds of dust, through all that wealth of oak and fern, and hill and dale, and gleaming glade and darkling dell, that make a midsummer fairyland of Windsor Forest on your way to Ascot Races.

The man who had thus pulled up his team for alteration of their harness was a well-dressed, clean-made, good-looking young fellow enough. From the crown of his white hat to the soles of his varnished boots he was a gentleman all over; and if the choice little posy in his buttonhole betrayed a suspicion of dandyism, it was redeemed by the frankness of manner, the good-humoured and unaffected *bonhomie* cultivated by our young warriors of the Household Brigade, horse and foot.

Frank Vanguard, who belonged to the former of these services, was now steering the regimental drag and a roof-full of brother officers to the great

Olympic gathering of modern times on the Cup Day at Ascot.

Good spirits, good-humour, banter, repartee and nonsense, reigned supreme, constituting a combination called chaff; just as light wine, effervescence, and fragrant herbs, in due proportions, become "cups." The driver had enough to do, with a free but not very handy team and a crowded road, to the whole of which every carriage he passed assumed a prescriptive right; yet could he find leisure to answer in corresponding vein a volley of jesting remarks shot freely at him from behind.

"Frank," says a fresh-coloured young warrior, well qualified to enact the part of Achilles, so long as that hero was yet in girl's clothes, "there's a nice bit of galloping ground over the rise. You're not driving a hearse! Do spring 'em a bit, and give 'em the silk!"

"I'm not so fond of the silk as you are!" answered Frank, touching his near leader lightly under the bars, as a fly-fisher throws his line. "You used to get double-thonged pretty handsomely at Eton, I remember, but it hasn't done you much good."

"Rating and flogging," answered the other, puffing out volumes of smoke; "that's the way to spoil your young entry!"

"Waste of whipcord!" says a graver youth, desirous of all things in life that he should become a Master of Hounds. "They never made you steady from hare!"

"You got that, Charlie!" laughed another; but Charlie, ere this, has found a new interest in spasms of anxiety lest they should be passed by a rival drag, coming up in clouds of dust on their

quarter, like an enemy's frigate through the smoke of battle.

"Who's this cove?" he exclaimed eagerly. "Sits well on his box—nice short-legged team—keeps his whip quiet and drives to an inch."

"Snob!" replies a sententious captain, with long moustaches, "by name, Picard. Wouldn't have him in the Club. Did something abroad. Quite right. Heavy load and a roughish lot. Team, I should say, better bred than the company. Don't let him get by. D—n it all, Frank! that's a close shave!"

It *was* a close shave. Nothing but the affability with which the near wheeler, having recovered its temper, answered both rein and thong, kept the coach out of a roadside ditch, which would have sent one of the most promising coveys of Her Majesty's peculiar defenders into the thick of Her Majesty's preserves.

In keeping ahead of his rival, Frank Vanguard passed a barouche, from the inside of which was turned up to him a fair statue-like face, with dark eyes and hair, that flushed faintly under its white lace veil, as it gave him a little modest nod of recognition. No wonder he looked back; no wonder, thus looking, he brought his wheel so near the edge of a chasm that one turn more would have turned him over, and that Miss Hallaton, holding her breath, shut both hands tight, while her father exclaimed—

"Nearest thing I ever saw in my life! Who's driving, Helen? He bowed to *you*."

And Helen, answering demurely, "Captain Vanguard, I *think*, papa," reflected how, had he been upset and hurt, the whole brightness of her day would have darkened into sorrow, and how

she wished he wouldn't be quite so reckless, though she liked him for being so bold.

Behind their barouche came a tax-cart, and behind the tax-cart another open carriage, in which drove the party who had assembled at dinner in No. 40 not very long ago.

Uncle Joseph, with his back to the horses, sat in unusual pomp and magnificence, pointing out the humours, explaining the races, and generally laying down the law, as though he combined in his own person the Mastership of the Buckhounds with the authority of the whole Jockey Club. Owner of a pretty little villa on the Thames, he had invited his kinswoman, the lady of his affections, and Mr. Goldthred to stay with him for Ascot Races. Therefore the Lilies smiled gay in chintz and muslin and fresh-cut flowers. Therefore Uncle Joseph, basking in a June sun and the light of Miss Ross's eyes, felt ten, twenty years younger—hopeful, enterprising, volatile as a boy!

Mrs. Lascelles was at all times a person of equable spirits. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that she possessed that self-command which forbids emotion to appear on the surface. She looked bright, smiling, gracious as usual; her lustrous eyes, rosy lips, and white teeth, enhanced by bonnet, dress, pink-tinted parasol, general sense of triumph, and flush of the summer's day. Poor Goldthred, sitting over against her, strove to stifle certain misgivings that such a goddess was too noble a prize for creatures of common mould, and vaguely wished he had kept away from the flame, round which, like some singed moth, he could not help fluttering in senseless, suicidal infatuation!

Parties of pleasure cannot always be equally pleasant to everybody concerned. Miss Ross, too,

seemed out of spirits and preoccupied; less gracious to Goldthred, less confiding with Mrs. Lascelles, less susceptible to the attentions of Uncle Joseph himself. Jin, as she was now called in her own set, sank back among the cushions, buried in strange, sad memories, that made her unconscious of the noise, the dust, the glare, the confusion of tongues, the crush of carriages, all the charms of the expedition. This, because playing at a cottage door, shouting vigorously as they passed, she had caught a glimpse of a ruddy, dark-eyed urchin, who reminded her painfully of her child. It was but one glance, as he sat triumphant in the dust, waving two dirty little hands round a black curly head, yet it was enough. She was back in sunny France once more, with something to trust in, something to work for, something to love. Looking in Uncle Joseph's battered old face and cloudy eyes, rather near her own, she could scarcely repress a movement of abhorrence and disgust; while he, good man, under the impression that he was more delightful than usual, inveighed against the furious driving, the extravagant habits, and general recklessness of the Household Cavalry.

"He's very good-looking!" observed Jin, rousing herself to make a remark that she knew would be unpalatable to her listener; "isn't he, Rose?"

"Very!" assented Mrs. Lascelles; "but you should see him in regimentals, my dear. I think I'll ask him to dinner."

Symptoms of mental disquietude in Uncle Joseph and young Goldthred. Each marvelling that a transitory glimpse, while passing at a hand-gallop, should have made so vivid an impression; and the latter wondering whether, if he were to alter

the whole tenor of his life, to arm his chest with a cuirass, and to plunge his legs into jack-boots, Mrs. Lascelles would deem him also worth looking at in "regimentals," as an officer's uniform is called by nobody but ladies who have never been in a regiment.

No amusement, except perhaps cricket, seems so popular as racing, yet out of every hundred people who attend Epsom, Ascot, or Doncaster, do you suppose five know one favourite from another, or, indeed, ever look at the noble animal, except he shows temper in his canter before the start? Helen Hallaton, though she dearly loved a horse, could not even have told you how many were going for the race about to commence as she took up her station on the Course; and yet the pretty pageant, bright and blooming like a June flower-bed, passed under her very nose. But she could have given a clear account of the masterly manner in which Frank Vanguard brought his coach into the enclosure; how he laid it alongside Viscount Jericho's, with as much pomp and little less manœuvring than moors an ironclad at regulation distance from her consort; with what easy magnificence he flung his reins to right and left, condescendingly facetious the while with sundry muscular cads, who put their shoulders to the wheels and deftly extracted the pole. She could have told you how he leaped like a Mercury from his box, how carefully he laid aside his whip in its case, how with a silk handkerchief he dusted his white hat, his shirt-front, his curling moustaches, and the places where his whiskers were coming fast; lastly, how he took from the inside of the coach a beautiful little nosegay, daintily tied up, and stuck it into his buttonhole, causing her to

admit in her own mind that she wouldn't mind wearing one of those flowers herself, if she could have it without its being given her.

Of all this, I say, Miss Hallaton made accurate note; but I doubt if she had an idea of Mr. Picard's team, though it came next; of his flash-looking load, with a loudish lady on the box; of his blue coach, his red wheels, his well-dressed servants, or the workmanlike pull-up which brought the whole thing to an anchor, and was, indeed, one of the best performances of the day.

And now a dozen two-year-olds, after a dozen false starts, have run off their five furlongs with the speed of an express train, and the Termagant filly, overpowering her jockey, a little bundle of pink satin and puff, huddled up on her back, has won by a neck. There is a lull till the numbers are up for the next race, and even the Ring, hungry, insatiate, roaring like the ocean, has subsided into a momentary calm. Sir Henry takes a cigar from a gorgeous case, and turns to his daughter.

"Backed her for her blood, Nell," said he; "they're all speedy, but they can't stay. Only a pony—that's better than nothing, however."

"How *can* you, papa?" replies Nell. "It's wicked of you to bet, though you do generally seem to win."

Helen draws the usual distinction as to the immorality of gambling. To win is less than folly, to lose is more than sin. I do not think, though, that Sir Henry was equally confiding about his wages when his judgment had been at fault. He seemed in the best of humours now.

"Nell, that's the prettiest bonnet we've hoisted the whole season, and the dress isn't the worst I've seen to-day. It's cruel to waste such a get-up in

a carriage. Come across, and we'll show ourselves on the Lawn."

"And you won't bet on the next race, papa?" says Helen, delighted; for is there not a chance, nay, almost a certainty, that Captain Vanguard, having eaten, and drunk, and smoked, and been through all the other privileged portals, will come to the Lawn for inspection of countless ladies drawn up in line-of-battle on their own special parade-ground?

The great tumult of the day was over; the Royal party had arrived under the usual burst of cheers; the greys had been admired; the carriages commented on; the Master of the Buckhounds, his horse, his figure, his boots, his seat, and all that covered it, subjected to rigid criticism. Everybody had a few spare minutes to walk about and admire or ridicule everybody else. As father and daughter set foot on the smooth burnt-up slope in front of the boxes, they came suddenly face to face with Mrs. Lascelles and Miss Ross. Each lady caught sight of Sir Henry at the same moment, and waited to see what her friend would do. I believe that if one had turned coldly on her heel, in answer to his ready salute, the other would have followed suit, and neither would ever have spoken to her fickle admirer again. But it is probable that the latter's habits familiarised him with such meetings, for in an instant he had both by the hand, and was accosting them with that mixture of interest, deference, and cordiality which constituted the charm of his very agreeable manner. He seemed to take it as a matter of course that he should have made love to both, that they should all meet at Ascot, and that he should proceed to make love to them again.

"So glad to see you, Mrs. Lascelles!" exclaimed

this hardened offender. "How wet you must have got the last time we parted. I sent my carriage after you directly I got home, but it was too late. So glad to see you, Miss Ross. You left us in such a hurry we didn't half wish you good-bye. Helen and I were very dull without you. Here she is—don't she look well? don't you both look well? don't we all look well?"

With such effrontery it was impossible not to fall into an easy strain of conversation; and after an affectionate greeting had been exchanged between Helen and her two presumptive step-mothers, the whole party proceeded to Mrs. Lascelles's box, from whence, without crowding or inconvenience, they could see the race for the Cup, in so far as it was affected by the run-in seventy yards from home.

Sir Henry, who had another "pony" depending on this event, would have liked to be a little nearer the judge's chair; but I doubt if the ladies cared much for the final struggle, decided by half a length. Mrs. Lascelles, thinking that her old admirer looked worn, handsome, and gentleman-like, in spite of crowsfeet and grizzling whiskers, while resolving to punish him severely for his treachery, was reflecting that the process would be by no means unpleasant to herself. Miss Ross continued silent and preoccupied, haunted by the vision of that sturdy boy kicking and crowing in the dirt. While Helen, commanding the four-in-hand coaches with her glass, saw only Vanguard's shapely figure on the roof of his drag as he turned to watch the race; and when the excitement was over, sprang down to mingle with the crowd that poured into the Course, on his way, as she hoped and believed, to join them here.

Now he stops to speak to a good-looking bad-

looking man, whom she recognises as the driver of the coach which so nearly overtook his own. Certain courtesies of the road have already made these two acquaintances, and almost friends. Now he bows to a duchess, now nods to a gipsy; presently he is lost in the throng, and emerges under their very box, when good-humoured Mrs. Lascelles, doing as she would be done by, beckons him up at once, and makes ready a place for him at Miss Hallaton's side.

He has something pleasant to say to each lady; and Miss Ross rouses herself to observe his good looks, enhanced by that frank air of courtesy, peculiar to an English gentleman, which is so fascinating to the women least accustomed to it. She gives him the benefit of a deadly shot or two from her black eyes, as he seats himself by Helen's side; and the girl, quick-sighted, silent, sensitive, feels each glance like a stab.

But it is pleasant to have him here, out of the crowd, amidst this beautiful scenery, under the summer sun, and over her steals that feeling of security and complete repose which is the infallible test of genuine affection.

He is quiet and happy too. Neither of them says much; perhaps they have a good deal to think of, and are thinking of it.

Uncle Joseph and young Goldthred, returning from an unremunerative expedition to the betting-ring, are somewhat discomfited to observe this invasion of their territories, but become speedily reassured in detecting Sir Henry's obvious anxiety to escape, that he may get "on" for the next race, and the ill-concealed admiration of Frank Vanguard for that reckless individual's daughter.

Mr. Groves backs Mrs. Lascelles's invitation freely.

"You will come and dine, Sir Henry," says she; "promise, and I'll let you off this minute. You know you are dying to get back to that wicked betting. Think of Helen. She'll be tired to death with the journey to London in a stuffy railway. Things! You don't want any things. Besides, why not work the wires? Telegraph for your servants to bring them down. We needn't dress for dinner. Captain Vanguard, if you can get away from the barracks, won't you come too?"

Frank looked at Helen, Helen looked resolutely at the card in her hand. He was forced unwillingly to decline, but doubtless remarked the colour fade in her cheek while he did so, expressing at the same time a hope of meeting next day. Uncle Joseph, who had quite abandoned the control of his own household, expressed entire satisfaction with everybody's arrangements, and Miss Ross whispered in his ear, "it was very dear of him to be so good-natured!"

Goldthred, too, having lost nine pairs of gloves, six and a half, three buttons, to Mrs. Lascelles, was in the seventh heaven. Altogether, not many race-goers left the Course better pleased with themselves that day. And Mr. Picard, looking down at Helen as he passed her carriage driving home, said to the loudish lady by his side—

"*That's* the handsomest girl I've seen the whole season; I wonder who she is?"

To which the loudish lady replied with acrimony—

"Do you think so? Well, perhaps she is fresh-looking, in a bread-and-butter, missyish sort of style. Can't you go a little faster? One gets choked with this horrid dust!"

CHAPTER VII

FRANK

THE barrack-room of a subaltern in the Household Cavalry has been lately described by a gifted authoress as resembling "the boudoir of a young duchess." My experience of the latter, I honestly confess, is exceedingly limited, but I think I know enough of the former tenement to submit that our talented romancer has overstated her case. She would have been nearer the mark, I imagine, had she compared the lair of the formidable warrior to a servants' hall, a laundry, a condemned cell, or some such abode of vacuity and desolation, modified principally by whitewash. Gaudy pictures on the walls, gaudy flowers in the window-sill, do indeed serve to brighten the neutral tints prevailing in an officer's quarters, as provided by his grateful country, and a barrack-room chair is an exceedingly comfortable resting-place in which to smoke the pipe of peace in the stronghold of war. For ease, merriment, and good-fellowship, give me the habitation of the dragoon; but when you talk of pomp, luxury, taste, and refinement, I am prepared to back the duchess, ay, even though she be a dowager duchess, against all the cavalry regiments in the Army List, and give you the Horse Artillery in!

Let us take, for example, the room in which Frank Vanguard lies fast asleep, at ten in the

morning, though a summer sun, streaming through the open window, bathes him, like a male Danaë, in floods of gold. He possesses horses, carriages, costly jewellery, clothes in abundance, boots innumerable, yet his furniture consists of the following items :—

One iron bedstead, without curtains ; one wooden tub ; one enormous sponge, one medium-sized ditto ; a chest of drawers, constructed to travel by baggage-waggon ; a huge box, meant to hold saddlery ; a stick and whip stand ; twelve pairs of spurs ; a set of boxing-gloves ; four steeplechase prints ; and a meerschaum pipe he never smokes. These, with a chair or two, and a few toilet necessaries, comprise the whole furniture of his apartment ; and he is happier here than in luxurious London lodgings, lordly castle, or stately country-house.

The song of birds, the flutter of the summer morning, snort, stamp, and stable-call, ring of bridle and clink of steel, all fail to wake him. He is not for duty to-day, and never went to bed till five in the morning.

To say nothing of the mess-man and his satellites, it is a heavy week, that of Ascot Races, for field officers, captains, subalterns, and all concerned in the dispensation of unbounded hospitality at Windsor during the meeting. They entertain countless guests, they convey them to and from the Course, they provide board and lodging for the gentlemen, amusement and adoration for the ladies, they are afoot day and night ; yet seem always fresh, lively, good-humoured, and on the alert. But even cavalry officers are mortal, and though they never confess it, they *must* be very tired, and a little thankful when the whole function is over.

No wonder Frank sleeps so sound—dreaming,

doubtless of—what? His dark brown charger, his chestnut mare, the stag he shot last year in Scotland, the team he drove yesterday to Ascot? Of Miss Hallaton, perhaps, and the deep lustrous eyes that haunted him so while he flung himself on his bed and went off into the very slumber from which he is roused, even now, by unceremonious knuckles tapping at the door.

A sleepy man says "Come in" without waking, and enter a soldier-servant nearly seven feet high, who proceeds to fill the tub, and further dressing arrangements generally, with a clatter, that he has found from experience of many masters is the surest way to get a sluggard out of bed. This stalwart personage considers himself responsible (and it is no light burthen) that his officer should always be in time. With a cornet his prevision is touching, and almost maternal in its care. Having thoroughly roused the sleeper, his servant plants himself at the bedside, drawn up to an exceeding altitude, in the position drill-sergeants call "attention."

"What is it?" says Frank, yawning.

"Gentleman come to breakfast, sir. Waiting in the little mess-room."

"Order it at once, Blake, and say I'll be down in twenty minutes."

Exit Blake, facing to the right, solemnly but far less noisily than he came in; while Frank with one bound is on the floor, and with another in his tub, not feeling his eyes quite open till he has splashed the bracing cold water into them more than once.

While he shaves and dresses, getting through each process with surprising celerity, I may state that the gentleman waiting breakfast for him below is none other than Mr. Picard, the driver of the blue

coach with red wheels, the quick-stepping browns, and the loudish lady of the day before.

A timely pull in Frank's favour, when the latter was in difficulties with his team at an awkward corner on the Heath,—a little judicious flattery extolling the capabilities of that team, and the mode in which it was handled,—a draught of champagne-cup offered,—a cigar exchanged,—and Vanguard was so pleased with his new friend, that he pressed the invitation which now brought him to breakfast in the officers' mess-room, accompanied by an appetite that never failed, and a determination to make the most of this, as of all other advantages in the game of life.

A couple of cornets are already hard at work, with the voracity of youth just done growing in length but not breadth. Their jaws cease simultaneously at the entrance of a stranger, and, boys as they are, the instinct of each warns him against this plausible personage, whom, as a guest, they welcome nevertheless with hospitality and perfect good breeding. It speaks well for Picard's *savoir faire*, that long ere his entertainer comes down he has made a favourable impression on these late Etonians, so that, emerging to smoke outside in couples as usual, says one inseparable to the other—

"Pleasant company that hairy chap, and tongue enough for a street-preacher! Who the devil is he, Jack, and where did Frank pick him up?"

To which Jack, whose real name is Frederic, replies with deliberation—

"Not *quite* the clean potato, young man, you may take my word for it. But that makes no odds. We'll have him to dinner. Shouldn't wonder if the party could sing a good song and do conjuring tricks."

"Pea-and-thimble and the rest of it," rejoins his friend. "Come and look at my bay mare."

So, dismissing Picard from their thoughts, they leave him to Frank Vanguard and breakfast.

These appear simultaneously. Frank, looking exceedingly clean, fresh, and handsome, is full of apologies for keeping his guest waiting.

"But you see we were very late last night," he urges, "and I'm not one of those fellows who can do entirely without sleep. If I don't get four or five hours I'm fit for nothing. It's constitutional, no doubt. I think I must have been *born* tired."

Picard laughs—and when he laughs his expression changes for the worse. "I can sit up for ever," says he, "if there's anything to sit up for. A roll in the blankets and a tub are as good as a night's rest to me. Now, you'll hardly believe I was playing *écarté* till six this morning, and came down by the nine o'clock train!"

Frank *didn't* believe it, though it was true enough, but helped himself to a cutlet without expressing incredulity.

"Did you drive all the way back yesterday?" said he. "You must have been late in London, and it's a good day's work."

"I had three teams on the road," answered the other, "and only one of them took any getting together. Faith, the heaviest part of the business was talking to Mrs. Battersea! She would come, and she would sit on the box, and she sulked all the way home. You'll never guess why."

Mrs. Battersea was a celebrity of a certain standing in certain circles, not quite without the pale of decent society, yet as near the edge as was possible, short of actual expulsion. If a male Battersea existed he never appeared, and the lady who bore

his name, a showy middle-aged woman, with a fine figure, and all the airs of a beauty, seemed in no wise restricted by matrimonial thraldom. She was one of those people to be seen at reviews, races, and all open-air gatherings within twenty miles of London—at flower-shows, plays, operas, and charity concerts in the Metropolis; but nobody ever met her at a dinner-party, a ball, or a drum. To sum up—men like Picard called her a stunner; ladies like Mrs. Lascelles said she was bad style.

Frank, thinking none the better of this new friend for the freedom with which he talked of his female acquaintance, professed ignorance of Mrs. Battersea's reasons for discontent.

"Not easily pleased, I daresay," he answered carelessly. "Sometimes they're not, when they have everything their own way. Nervous on a coach, perhaps? And yet that could hardly be, for you've got the handiest team out, and I can see you're as good as most professionals."

"Guess again," said the other, who had finished breakfast and was lighting a cigar.

Frank pondered.

"Seen a better-looking woman than herself, then; that'll do it sometimes, I've remarked. And they're bad to hold when they think there's something else in the race. If it wasn't that, I give it up."

"You're right, Vanguard," exclaimed his guest. "You've hit it, sir, plumb-centre, as we used to say on the Potomac. Mrs. Battersea never ceased talking all the way down; and some queer things she told us, too! The rough side of her tongue rasps like a file. Well, she was in high feather the whole day. Liked her luncheon, liked her bonnet, liked herself, liked her company, so she said; but,

coming off the Course, we passed a duck of a girl in an open carriage; a girl with wonderful eyes and a pale face, but features like Melpomene. She'd got on a light-coloured dress, with a lilac sort of bonnet —I daresay you didn't notice her."

Frank's heart leaped to his throat, meeting his final gulp of coffee. *Didn't notice her*, forsooth! while the wonderful eyes, pale face, Melpomene mouth, light dress, even the lilac bonnet, had been haunting him for the last twelve hours.

"I only said, 'What a pretty girl!' as we went by," continued Picard, "and, will you believe it, Mrs. Battersea got her frill out on the instant! She never gave us another civil word the whole way to London; not one to share amongst the whole coach-load. Those two little Carmine girls that I brought down for Macdonald and Algy Brown were so frightened they wanted to stop at Hounslow and go home by the omnibus! That was after she caught Rosie making faces behind her back. Algy tried to take his poor little pal's part, and didn't she chaw *him* up too! Rather! I'd nothing to do but mind my driving, and think of the Helen who had done all this mischief."

"How did you know her name was Helen?" asked Frank, completely off his guard.

"Well, I *didn't*," said the other, wondering at his host's excitement; "but I suppose now that it *is*, and that you know her. Couldn't you introduce me?"

"Certainly, if you wish it," was the reply, "though probably we don't mean the same lady. There *is* a Miss Hallaton that answers to your description, and she was at the races yesterday. Daughter of Sir Henry Hallaton, rather a good-looking, oldish man, in a white hat and red neck-cloth."

"That's it!" exclaimed Picard; "I spotted the father, red neckcloth and all! Depend upon it you're right, and it must have been Miss —— What's her name? Hallaton? Well, all I can say is, I've not seen a better-looking one since I left Charleston, and very few who could beat her there. Do they go much to London? Do they live anywhere near here? I think the governor's a loosish fish. I saw him drinking cup with some queer-looking people behind my coach, and he was in and out of the Ring all day. Beg pardon, Vanguard, if they're friends of yours. I didn't mean to say anything disagreeable, I give you my word."

"Oh, I don't know them very well," said Frank, growing red, and feeling that he was making himself ridiculous. "I stayed with them last winter, near Bragford. Capital place to hunt from, and Sir Henry was very kind and hospitable. If you're quite done, shall we come outside? The drag will start in an hour, and I will have a place kept for you, if you'd like to go with the others from here."

"I am not going at all," answered Picard. "The fact is, I'm not much of a racing man, and two days running is rather a benefit. Don't let me put you out in your arrangements, I beg. This is a beautiful neighbourhood, and I've been so much abroad, that I quite enjoy the air, and the English scenery, and the rest of it. I'd rather take a quiet walk while you're all at the races; but I'll stay and see you start the team notwithstanding."

"Not going!" thought Frank. "How very odd! Now, what can a fellow like this have to do down here on the sly? Country walk! Gammon! he's after some robbery, I'll lay a hundred!" But he only said—

"My cornet's going to drive. I don't think I

shall be on the Heath at all, unless I gallop a hack over in the afternoon."

"Hot work," answered Picard carelessly. "I thought everybody was keen about racing, except me." But he too wondered at the taste of his entertainer in thus preferring a solitary morning to a pleasant drive in the merriest of company, accounting for it on a theory of his own.

"Warpath, of course! and, keen as a true Indian, means to follow it up alone. Got 'sign,' no doubt, and sticks to the trail like a wolf. Won't come back, I'll lay a thousand, without raising hair. Ah! this child, too, could take scalps once, and hang them round his belt, with the best of ye! And *now*— Well, I'm about no harm to-day, at anyrate, and that's refreshing, if it's only for a change!"

So he sat himself down on a garden seat in front of the officers' quarters, where, producing a case the size of a portmanteau, filled with such cigars as are only consumed by trans-Atlantic smokers, and, offering them liberally all round, he soon became the centre of an admiring circle, civil as well as military, to whom he related sundry experiences of international warfare in the States, well-told, interesting, no doubt, and more startling than probable.

Mr. Picard had certain elements of popularity, such as launch a man in general society fairly enough, but fail to afford him secure anchorage in that restless element. He was good-looking, well-dressed, plausible, always ready to eat, drink, smoke, dance, play, or, indeed, partake in the amusement of the hour. He looked like a gentleman, but nobody knew who he was. He seemed to have a sufficiency of money, but nobody knew where he got it. The

Court Guide vouched for him as J. Picard, Esq., under the letter "P," with two addresses, a first-rate hotel, and a third-rate club. The *Morning Post* even took charge of him in its fashionable arrivals and departures. Men began to know him after the Epsom Spring, and by Hampton Races he had ceased to arouse interest, scarcely even excited curiosity, but had failed to make a single female acquaintance above the class of Mrs. Battersea; nor had he, indeed, gained one step of the social ladder people take such pains to climb, in order to obtain, after all, but a wider view from Dan to Beersheba.

Such men crop up like mushrooms at the beginning of every London season, and fade like annuals with the recess. Goodwood sees the last expiring blaze of their splendour, and next year, if you ask for them, they are extinct; but, as the Highland soldier says, "there are plenty more where they come from." In dress, style, manner, they vary but little. All dine constantly at Richmond, shoot well, and drive a team, in the handling of which they improve vastly as the season wears on.

Mr. Picard could, however, lay claim to a little more interest than the rest, in his character of a soldier-adventurer, to which he was entitled by service with the Confederates during their prolonged struggle against overwhelming odds. Somehow, every soldier-adventurer concerned in that war seems to have been a Southerner. Certainly the romance was all on their side, though the scale, weighed down by great battalions, turned in favour of the North. From his own account, Picard had done his little best, as he called it, for the party he espoused; and observing a gash on his cheek, which could only be a sabre-cut, it was hard

to listen coldly while he talked of Stonewall Jackson and Brigadier Stuart as ordinary men do of Bright and Gladstone—perhaps with no more familiar knowledge of the heroes than a general public has of these statesmen. Still, the subject was captivating and well treated, the contrast between Stuart's dashing, desperate, rapidly moving light horsemen and Her Majesty's Cuirassiers of the Guard was exciting, the similarity in many points flattering to both. Cornets listened open-mouthed, and felt the professional instinct rising strong in their martial young souls; older officers smiled approbation, not disdaining to gather hints from one who had seen real warfare, as to nosebags, haversacks, picket-ropes, and such trifling minutiæ as affect the efficiency of armies, and turn the tide of campaigns. When the drag appeared, nobody discovered that Frank Vanguard had made a masterly retreat; and Picard had received as many invitations to remain and be put up in barracks as would have lasted him till the regiment changed quarters, and his entertainers had found out half he said was an old story, and the other half not true.

CHAPTER VIII

JUNE ROSES

UNCLE JOSEPH was a good judge of many things besides bonds, debentures, shares, and scrip. When he bought the Lilies we may be sure he had his wits about him, and made no imprudent investment. A prettier villa never was reflected in the Thames. Huge elms, spreading cedars, delicate acacias quivering in the lightest air, the very point-lace of the forest, were grouped by Nature's master-hand round a wide-porched, creeper-clad building, with long low rooms, and windows opening on a lawn, all aglow with roses budding, blushing, blooming, to the water's edge. It was a little paradise of leaf and flower and stream, such as is only to be found on the banks of our London river ; such as calls up at sight images of peace and love and hope, and sweet untried romance for the young and trustful ; such as wafts a thrill, not altogether painful, to the hearts of weary, wayworn travellers, for whom, in all that golden belief of the past, there is nothing real now but a memory and a sigh. Such a lawn, such a scene, such flowers, were thoroughly in keeping with

such a woman as Mrs. Lascelles, moving gracefully among the roses under a summer sky.

So thought poor Goldthred, emerging from the French windows of the breakfast-room for a *tête-à-tête* with his goddess, that might last half an hour, that might be cut short (he knew her caprices) in less than five minutes! A *tête-à-tête* from which he hoped to advance positively and tangibly in her favour, but which, like many others of the same kind, he feared might terminate in disappointment, discomfiture, despair.

Breakfast, with this unfortunate young man, had been a repast of paroxysms, alternating between rapture and dismay, such as completely destroyed anything like appetite or digestion. It was all very well for Uncle Joseph to go twice at the ham on the side-table, and devour such a lump of *pâté de foie gras* as would have choked a coal-heaver. It was all very well for Sir Henry, lounging down when everybody else had nearly done, avowedly with no appetite, after a cup of exceedingly hot coffee, to play as good a knife and fork as an Eton boy. It was all very well for the ladies, Mrs. Lascelles especially, to peck here and peck there—a slice of chicken, a strawberry, a bit of toast, an egg, a morsel of muffin, the least possible atom of pie—till each had made a pretty substantial meal. But could their heartless voracity stifle his (Goldthred's) sensibilities, or prevent his food tasting like leather, his tea like camomiles? Breakfast was over ere he recovered his proper senses, and then it was too late! The tonic so long denied this patient sufferer consisted of a few words from Mrs. Lascelles, not addressed, indeed, to himself, but accompanied by a glance he interpreted correctly, and accepted with delight.

"Uncle Joseph," said she, "your roses are shamefully neglected, and I shall inspect them thoroughly when I've drunk my tea."

Uncle Joseph, who, for sanitary reasons, never stirred till half an hour had elapsed after eating, grunted acquiescence; but Goldthred, unmindful of the *convenances*, rapturously followed his tyrant into the garden, the instant her muslin skirt disappeared over the window-sill.

She waited till they were out of sight from the house, then gathered a rose, fragrant, blooming, lovable as herself, and gave it him with a winning smile.

"I've got something to say to you, Mr. Goldthred —something I don't want everybody else to hear."

But for the flower pressed close against his lips, he felt that his heart must have leaped out of his mouth and fallen at her feet. Never a word he spoke, but the light in his eyes, the glow on his face, were answer enough.

"You won't be offended?" she continued, gathering rose after rose, and tying them up in a cluster, as she walked on. "You won't be cross, unreasonable, unkind? Indeed, it's for your own sake quite as much as mine. Mr. Goldthred, you can do me a great favour. Promise now; will you do it?"

He made no bargain; he showed no hesitation, but his very ears were crimson with sincerity while he answered—

"Do it, Mrs. Lascelles! What is there I wouldn't do for you? I wish you—you'd ask me to do something dangerous, or difficult, or—or impossible even! You'd see there's something in me, then, and perhaps you'd think better of me than you do now."

"Think better!" she repeated gaily. "Upon my word, I wonder what you'd have! But I don't want you to do anything impossible, no, nor even disagreeable. On the contrary, I should say it would be very pleasant. I want you to—to flirt a little with Miss Hallaton—there!"

"Mrs. Lascelles!" was all he said, but something in his tone caused her to laugh rather nervously, and quicken her pace as she continued—

"Oh, it's nothing to make a fuss about, and you needn't look so reproachful! Miss Hallaton is a very nice girl, and very pretty. I'm sure everybody thinks so, though she hasn't quite colour enough for my taste. You know you admire her, Mr. Goldthred, and why should you mind telling her so?"

"But I *don't*!" persisted Goldthred, in a great heat and fuss. "Can't you see, Mrs. Lascelles? Is it not plain?"

She made no scruple of interrupting him.

"Then you *must*!" she insisted, tying a white rose deftly in amongst its blushing sisters. You needn't be too much in earnest, you know, but I wish you to pay a little attention to Miss Hallaton, for reasons of my own. If you're very good, I'll tell you what they are."

Oh! cool and crafty spider! Oh! silly struggling fly! Blue-eyed spider in muslin and ribbons, fresh, smiling, radiant as morning. Helpless fly in tweed and broadcloth, wondering, blundering, blind as midnight. The fly buzzed a faint affirmative, and the spider went on—

"The fact is, Mr. Goldthred, you see you're a good deal with us, and I'm sure we're always delighted to have you. Both Jin and I like you very much. Jin says you are the only pleasant

young man she knows. But the world *will* talk, and—and—people are beginning to make remarks. I'm almost old enough to be your mother. Well; you needn't contradict one so flat. You know what I mean, you men are so much younger of your age than us poor women. But that makes no difference. One can't be too careful. Now if you were seen making up a little to Helen,—and she *is* a very charming girl, I assure you,—it would stop all their mouths. They say very disagreeable things as it is, and one must do *something*. I shouldn't like to think you were never to come and see me any more."

Was not this a golden opportunity? Did she hear the grating of that accursed rake just round the laurel bush? Could that be why her blue eyes shone so soft and kind, why the words dropped from her rosy mouth like honey from the comb? The gravel-walk (lately raked, and be hanged to it!) was rough as Brighton shingle; his trousers were of the thinnest fabric known to Messrs. Miles; yet I confidently believe Goldthred would have popped down on his knees, then and there, to run that one great chance he dwelt on night and day, but for the additional step that brought them face to face with a gardener working leisurely, in rolled-up shirt-sleeves, and surrounded by the implements of his art. Goldthred swore, I fear, though not aloud. The happy moment had slipped through his fingers like running water, like the sands of time, like change for a sovereign, like everything else in a world that keeps moving, whether we will or no. Of all impossibilities, there is none so impossible as to put the clock back.

Beyond this inopportune gardener, they came in sight of certain haymakers, and turning from these,

were close to the house once more. No further explanation was practicable, but unless some tacit agreement had been made to the lady's satisfaction, she would hardly have pushed her roses in the gentleman's face, with a sweet smile and a recommendation to inhale their fragrance while they were fresh.

"You deserve them all, indeed you do!" she said warmly. "And I'll put the best of them on your dressing-table myself. Thank you really. You won't forget your promise? I know I can depend upon you."

Then she marched into the drawing-room laden with her spoils, well pleased; while Goldthred, retiring to smoke the morning cigar, felt less satisfied, on reflection, than he had been when the white fingers and red roses were so close to his lips a while ago.

It seems that in all couples, not excepting the matrimonially tethered, a pair must necessarily pull different ways. Goldthred's innocent notion of heaven upon earth was that this despotic lady should become his wife, but she had handled him so skilfully, he dare not ask for fear of being refused. Mrs. Lascelles, who deserved some credit for crushing down the instinct of appropriation, natural to all women, however little they may prize an admirer, would have been glad, to do her justice, that Helen, for her own sake, should make an advantageous marriage. She reflected, moreover, that her furtherance of such an arrangement would bring her into closer relations with Sir Henry. Then she wondered whether she still liked him, confessing in her secret heart she was almost afraid she did.

That careless, easy-going personage had dis-

posed himself, in the meantime, on the most sloping of garden chairs under a tree. Helen had brought him the morning and weekly papers, also one of the evening before. He was cool, comfortable, and thoroughly satisfied with Sir Henry Hallaton. His rings were more abundant, his whiskers more riotous, his handkerchief of brighter hues than ever. Had he not looked so like a gentleman, his style of dress would have been gaudy and almost slangy; but the combination had done him good service for many years, and he stuck to it still. Smoking a huge cigar, he watched its wreaths curling and clinging about the dark, crisp foliage of the cedar-branch overhead, while his thoughts wandered dreamily amongst the various interests of his pleasant, lazy, useless, and rather selfish life: his Alderneys at Blackgrove; his bailiff's book; the two-year-old they were breaking at home; the brougham Barker was building him in London; Outrigger's chance in the Thames Handicap to-day; Uncle Joseph's dry champagne last night; the dress Mrs. Lascelles wore yesterday at the races; how Miss Ross had pulled in her waist this morning; on divine women in endless perspective, whom he had loved, or thought he loved, or made love to without even that excuse, concluding how very few were equal to Helen. What a dear little thing it was as a child! What a graceful, engaging girl! So frank, so gentle, such a lady, and so fond of him! Suspecting that, after all, he really cared more for his own daughter than he had ever cared for the daughter, or wife, or mother of anybody else.

Arriving at this conclusion, and the end of his cigar, he was aware of a light step on the lawn, a rustle of muslin skirts trailing across the sward,—a familiar sound, to which, I fear, Sir Henry's ear

turned, as turns the charger's to the trumpet call, the hunter's to the well-known challenge of a find. Miss Ross, carrying a plateful of strawberries, bent over him, a world of mirth and mischief gleaming in her bright black eyes.

"You take life very easily, Sir Henry," said she, looking down on his recumbent figure with a sort of sarcastic admiration. "I'm a pretty cool hand myself, so people tell me, but I can't hold a candle to you, I must confess."

"Exactly," replied Sir Henry. "Prettier, but not so cool. I quite agree with you. I know what you mean."

"I don't mean it a bit!" exclaimed Miss Ross; "and of all people in the world I don't want *you* to tell me I'm pretty. You know that, or, at least, you ought to know it by this time!"

"Don't you think I'm a good judge?" asked this incorrigible person, with a smile of entire satisfaction.

She could not help laughing.

"Perhaps too good a judge," she answered; "but a judge that shall never find me guilty, I promise you. No; what I envy is your unrivalled *sang-froid*, your entire freedom from anxiety in a position that would make most people feel awkward, if not uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable!" he repeated; "why uncomfortable? Ah! perhaps you're right, and I do want another cushion. I'd go and fetch it, Miss Ross, only I'd much rather stay where I am, and talk to you."

She shot another scornful glance, not that he was the least abashed by it, and went on—

"You've got all sorts of duties, cares, responsibilities, but they don't seem to affect you in the

"You take life very easily, Sir Henry."

least — property, debts, of course" (Sir Henry nodded assent), "politics, position, that charming daughter; a bad day yesterday—you see I know all about it—and a certain loss to-day, if you don't bestir yourself, on the Thames Handicap. Yet there you sit, as unmoved, and almost as highly ornamented, as a Hindoo idol. I wish I had your secret!"

"Very simple," answered the other. "Irons! Nothing but irons! Plenty of them, and put them all in the fire at once. Dividing your cares is like dividing your affections—one balances another, and you carry them as easy as a milkmaid carries her pails."

"That's all very fine in theory," replied Miss Ross; "but there's such a thing as spilt milk, and a dozen cold irons won't prevent a hot one burning your fingers. There's a hot one to-day in the Thames Handicap. Never mind how I know it, Sir Henry, but I do know it. This horse they call Outrigger has no more chance of winning than your hat! Why do you tie that hideous gauze thing round it?"

Sir Henry was equal to the occasion.

"Suits my style of ugliness," he answered; adding, with well-assumed carelessness—"so Outrigger won't win, Miss Ross. Why won't he?"

"Not meant!"

"I never thought he was," said Sir Henry, who had backed the horse for more money than he liked to think of. "My impression, you see, agrees with your information. I don't doubt it, of course, particularly as you won't tell me where you got it."

"I won't indeed," asseverated Jin, who would have been puzzled to name her authority, inasmuch as the startling intelligence originated in her own

fertile brain. For particular reasons this unscrupulous young lady was anxious the whole party from the Lilies should start for the races together, while she alone remained at home. In discussing their plans the evening before, great lukewarmness had been shown on this point; Helen, perhaps for particular reasons, too, professing indifference to the coming day's sport. Even Sir Henry did not seem to have made up his mind; but Miss Ross argued, correctly enough, that if he went, Mrs. Lascelles would go, and the rest of the party would surely accompany their hostess; then, at the last moment, she could frame an excuse, and so have the day to herself. Therefore it was she made no scruple in calumniating the merits of Outrigger and the honesty of his owners.

Sir Henry was now in a desperate fidget to be off. He must get "out," he felt, at any price, and a few minutes might make all the difference. He stretched himself, yawned with an affectation of carelessness that did not in the least deceive his companion, and asked when the carriages were ordered.

"The same time as yesterday," answered Miss Ross, pleased with the result of her stratagem. "You won't say I told you," she added, looking coquettishly down at the recumbent baronet.

"Of course not," was the reply; but his thoughts were far away, probably with a stout speculator, wearing a suit of gorgeous tartan, and diamond rings on exceedingly dirty hands.

"How shall I stop your mouth?" she said, innocently enough, blushing nevertheless, though she rarely betrayed confusion, as the words escaped her.

It was impossible to be offended at the quaint,

mischievous expression with which Sir Henry looked up in her face, and Jin fairly burst out laughing, while she popped a ripe red strawberry between his lips.

"This will do it for the present!" said she; "and don't forget you owe me a good turn for giving you what, I believe, you racing gentlemen call 'the straight tip'!"

CHAPTER IX

TOUCH AND GO

A LAWN commanded by the windows of a drawing-room, in which people are settling their plans for the day, can scarcely be considered a fitting locality for the interchange of courtesies not intended for general supervision. The stoppage of Sir Henry's mouth, as described in the preceding chapter, was witnessed by three different persons, all of whom, in their respective degrees, chose to feel aggrieved, disgusted, and surprised. The position was picturesque, no doubt, the accessories in perfect keeping, the strawberry rich and ripe, but such familiarities are apt to breed contempt in the bystanders, especially if of the better-behaved and less tolerant sex. Helen did not approve of these liberties being taken with papa; Mrs. Lascelles, for the first time, doubted whether she had acted wisely in entering on so close an alliance with this reckless adventuress, remembering a certain fable, in which the horse, having called in the assistance of man against his enemy, was never his own master again; while Uncle Joseph, looking pompously out of window, with his hands in his pockets, turned yellow from jealousy, and became speechless with disgust.

There is no pleasanter hour of the day than that which succeeds breakfast in a country-house,

while people are organising the occupations, or amusements, as they call them, that must last till dinner; but with the party collected at the Lilies there seemed to be more than the usual diversity of opinion as to how their time should be spent.

Helen "didn't much care about going to the races—wondered if it would rain—feared it would be hot—did feel a little tired this morning," but, being pressed, was obliged to confess, "she enjoyed yesterday very much!" Still, it was evident Helen did not want to go, equally evident she would not explain why.

Uncle Joseph, who had meditated a long walk with Miss Ross, combining exercise and sentiment, would have voted persistently against the Heath, but for the episode of the strawberry, which had so roused his wrath. He now declared it would be absurd to stay away, when at so short a distance, that they had better go in the same order as yesterday, and that he would desire luncheon to be put up at once; Uncle Joseph wisely considering that important meal a necessity of any outing in which pleasure was the avowed object.

Mrs. Lascelles did not the least care how she spent her morning, so long as it was passed in the company of Sir Henry. Goldthred, again, was willing to go anywhere or do anything if he might be with Mrs. Lascelles. Altogether, everybody's movements seemed dependent on the baronet, who walked coolly up the lawn to the drawing-room windows, pinning the gauze veil more carefully round his hat.

"What time are we to start?" said he, taking it for granted, as he wished to go himself, that everybody else did. "I'm afraid I must be on the Course

early; but that need not hurry the others. Nelly and I can go in my carriage, and I'll order it at once. Or I can take Mr. Goldthred, or do anything anybody likes. Who wants to come with me? You mustn't all speak at once!"

"I don't care about going at all, papa," said Helen, but intercepting a glance from their hostess, which ordered Goldthred, as plainly as eyes could speak, to remain and keep her company, added hastily, "unless there's plenty of room."

"Plenty of room!" echoed Mrs. Lascelles, with her own arrangements in view. "We shall only want one carriage if we take mine. Four of us inside, and Mr. Goldthred, for so short a distance, won't mind sitting on the box. No, that won't do; where are we to put Jin?"

"Jin's not going!" interrupted a voice from the open window of an upper room. "Jin's got a headache, and some letters to write. You won't get her to Ascot to-day unless you drag her with wild horses, so you needn't distress yourselves about Jin!"

Uncle Joseph's face turned from yellow to its normal tint of mottled brown. What a trump of a girl he thought her after all! And, fully convinced she was scheming to pass the whole morning with himself, sorely repented he should have so misjudged her a quarter of an hour ago.

His difficulty now was to avoid joining the rest of the party; but bethinking him of a certain substantial pony in the stable, called Punch, he declared he thought a thorough shaking would do him good, and expressed his intention of riding that animal to the Course.

"Once they're off," argued Uncle Joseph, "they'll never trouble their heads about their host,

and then, my pretty Jin, you and I can come to an understanding at last!"

Even with a party of four, however, it takes time to get pleasure-goers under weigh. Mrs. Lascelles forgot her smelling-bottle, Helen mislaid her shawl; Sir Henry, on whose account they had all hurried themselves, was ten minutes behind everybody else. The carriage stood a good half-hour at the door before it was fairly started, and Uncle Joseph spent that time in his own dressing-room, with his heart beating like a boy's.

At last the welcome sound of wheels announced that the coast was clear. He sallied forth eagerly, and, considering his years, with no little alacrity, in pursuit of his lady-love. Not in her bedroom, certainly, for the door stood wide open! Not in the drawing-room—the dining-room—the billiard-room, nor the boudoir! Zounds! not in the conservatory, nor on the lawn! Beads of perspiration broke out on Uncle Joseph's bald head, and he couldn't tell whether it was anger or anxiety that made him feel as if he was going to choke. Panting, protesting, under a burning sun, he followed the shrubbery walk that brought him to the hayfield, through which a thoroughfare for foot-people led to the highroad. Here he ran into the very arms of Goldthred, coming back by this short cut for his race-glasses, which he had forgotten, while the carriage waited at the nearest angle of the fragrant meadow, flecked and rippled with its new-mown hay.

Uncle Joseph was without his hat. He must have lost his head also, when, thinking it necessary to account for his disturbed appearance, he inquired vehemently—

"Have you seen Miss Ross? I—I forgot to order dinner before starting. I want to find Miss Ross."

"You won't overtake her," answered Goldthred coolly. "She was half-way across the next field when I came into this. She must be at the turnpike by now."

Uncle Joseph waited to hear no more. Breaking wildly from his informant, he dashed off towards the stable while the latter, recovering his glasses, walked solemnly back to the carriage, and jumped in, as if nothing had happened.

There is, at least, this good quality belonging to a man in love, that he is not easily astonished, nor does he occupy himself with the affairs of others. Goldthred had forgotten his meeting with Uncle Joseph, and dismissed the whole subject from his mind, before the carriage had got twenty yards or Mrs. Lascelles had spoken as many words.

Now Punch was a good stout cob, of that class and calibre which is so prized by gentlemen who have left off reckoning up their age and weight. After fifty, and over fifteen stone, it is needless to be continually balancing the account. Punch possessed capital legs and feet, sloping shoulders, an intelligent head with very small ears, a strong neck, and an exceedingly round stomach. Such an animal, I confess, I cannot but admire, and have no objection to ride, unless I am in a hurry. Even when time presses I bear the creature no malice, but I fear he hates me! Punch could scuttle along at his own pace for a good many miles; safely and perseveringly enough; but against yours, if you were in the habit of riding a thoroughbred hack, he would protest in a very few furlongs. Obviously, to such a quadruped, time was of the utmost importance, and it seemed hard so much of it had to be wasted daily in preparing him for a start.

Docile in his general character, perfectly free

from nervousness and vice, he had yet a provoking trick of puffing himself out during the operation of saddling to a size that rendered the roomiest girths in the stable too scanty for his swelling carcase. Ten minutes at least Uncle Joseph and the stable boy butted and tugged and swore, ere, to use the expression of the latter, they could make tongue and buckle meet. Ten minutes more were wasted in water-brushing the pony's mane, and blacking his round, well-shaped feet; for the urchin, true to the traditions of his craft, would forego not the smallest rite of that stable discipline in which he had been trained. Altogether, by the time Uncle Joseph was fairly in the saddle for pursuit, Miss Ross had got such a start as, with her light step and agile figure, precluded the possibility of being caught against her will.

Four miles an hour, heel and toe, gracefully and without effort, as if she was dancing, this active young person flitted across the hayfields, till she reached a humble little cottage standing between the highway and the river's brink. Here she disappeared from Uncle Joseph's sight, who had just viewed her, having bustled Punch along the hot, hard road at a place which put them both in a white lather.

The rider's first idea was to secure his steed and follow up the chase; but few men act on impulse after—what shall we say?—fifty; and Punch, who had his own opinion about waiting in the sun, might very probably slip his bridle in order to trot home! Reflecting with dismay on such a contingency, in such weather for walking, Uncle Joseph "concluded," as the Americans say, that he would wait where he was, and watch.

Miss Ross, in the meantime, happily unconscious that she was observed, tapped at the cottage-door,

which was opened by a dark-eyed urchin of five years or so, whom, to his intense astonishment, she smothered in kisses on the spot. Mrs. Mole, the owner of the cottage, emerging from the gloom of her back kitchen, was aware of a toss of black curls, and a pair of sturdy, struggling legs, not over clean, in the embrace of a radiant being who had dropped, to all appearance, from the clouds.

"Your servant, miss," said the old woman, drying her arms on her apron, while she performed a defiant curtsey. "You've—a—taken quite a fancy to my little lad, seemingly. Yet I don't remember to have ever seen you afore."

I often think the poor resent a liberty with so much more dignity than their betters.

For answer, Jin, whose French education had afforded her many useful little hints, slipped a packet of tea into the old woman's hand. It was what they drank at the Lilies, strong, fragrant, and five shillings a pound.

"I haven't the pleasure of knowing you, ma'am," said she civilly; "but I've seen this little angel before, and I can't help admiring him. Have you no more of them?"

Mrs. Mole was sixty if she was a day; but like your grandmother and mine, like everybody's grandmother, Eve herself, she was open to flattery. The supposition that this pretty child might be hers was pleasing; the inference that he had brothers and sisters, possibly younger than himself, gratifying indeed.

"He isn't my own, miss," said she, stroking the child's curls, who clung tight to her gown, with his eyes fixed on Miss Ross. "And more's the pity! —go to the lady, Johnnie, do!—for a sweeter babe, and a 'ealthier, you'll not put your 'and on, not from

here to Windsor Castle. He ain't got no mother, miss, nor he don't want none, do you, Johnnie? not so long as you've your old Moley to love ye—that's what he calls me, miss. My name's Mole, miss, askin' your pardon."

The child, who was a bold little fellow enough, having inspected the visitor thoroughly, as children always do inspect an object of apprehension, now took courage to seat himself on her knee, with his finger in his mouth and his eyes fixed on his boots, in undivided attention.

Miss Ross turned the plain little frock down to where, below the sunburned neck, his skin was white and pure as marble, all but one mottled mark, the size of a five-franc piece. Then she burst out crying, and Johnnie, sprawling in haste to the floor, howled hideously for company.

"Deary, deary me!" ejaculated Mrs. Mole, completely softened, and, to use her own expression, upset by these signals of distress. "Don't ye take on so, miss. Whist, Johnnie, this moment, or I'll give you something to cry for! Take a glass of water, miss. You've been walking too fast in the sun—or say the word, and I'll make ye a cup o' tea in five minutes."

"A glass of water, please," gasped Miss Ross; and while the old woman went to fetch it, followed by Johnnie, the young one summoned all her self-command not to betray her secret and her relationship to the child.

It was her own Gustave. Of that she could have no doubt since she had laid bare the mark between his shoulders. Perhaps she was sure of him yesterday, shouting at the cottage-door while the carriage passed; perhaps she had been sure all last night, waking every ten minutes from a dream

of her boy; all this morning, resolving that nothing should prevent her seeing him to-day; no, not the certainty of calumny, exposure, open shame! Had it been otherwise, she must have broken down more foolishly, more completely. Now she recovered herself, as she had often done before in positions of far greater difficulty. When she took the glass of water from Mrs. Mole's sympathising hand, her voice was steady, her face perfectly calm and serene.

"You are right," she said, "the sun is hot, and I walked here very fast. The sight of this pretty child, too, was rather trying. He reminds me of—of—a nephew I lost long ago. Thank you. I'm better now, but I *should* like to sit down and rest for half an hour, if I'm not in your way. So—so—this little fellow isn't yours, Mrs. Mole, after all."

Mrs. Mole dearly loved a gossip. So would you or I, if we spent our days in a two-roomed cottage, with no companion but a child, no amusement whatever, no occupation but cleaning household utensils for the purpose of dirtying them forthwith, no daily paper, no exchange of ideas, no exercise of the intellect, beyond a weekly effort to keep awake during the parson's sermon. Gossip indeed! If it was not for gossip how many good, industrious, hard-living women would go melancholy-mad?

"He's not mine, miss. I wishes he wur," she answered, with an elbow in the palm of each hand, an attitude Mrs. Mole considered favourable to conversation. "But, whatever I should do without Johnnie, or Johnnie without me, I know no more than the dead. The sense of that there child, miss, and the ways of 'un, you'd think as he was twelve years old at least. To see him take off his little

boots, and fold up his little clothes, every article, and come an' says his little prayers on my knee afore ever he goes to his little bed, it's wonderful, that's what it is!"

The tears were rising to Jin's eyes once more. "Who taught him to say his prayers?" she asked, keeping them down with an effort.

"Well, he didn't know none when he came here first," answered Mrs. Mole apologetically. "He's very young a-course, and he hadn't been taught none maybe. But, Lor' bless ye, that there child didn't want no teaching. Ah! there's children in heaven, I humbly hope, and I'll never believe but they're like my Johnnie!"

"A little tidier, I should suppose," thought Miss Ross, but she could have hugged this plain old woman nevertheless, for her kindly, honest heart.

"I can see he's well taken care of," she observed, turning the child's clothes with a mother's hand. "His skin shows how healthy he is, and he's as clean as a new pin."

Mrs. Mole glanced sharply in her visitor's face. "I ask yer pardon, ma'am," she said; "I kep' on calling of you 'miss,' and maybe you've children of your own."

Hugging the boy's head to her breast, Jin took no notice of this remark, but asked in turn how long the child had been there.

The question, though simple, produced a narrative of considerable volume, digressive, complicated, not free from tautology, and ample, even exuberant in detail. It comprised Mrs. Mole's girlhood, early life, peculiar character, and extraordinary experiences, together with a sketch of the late Mr. Mole's biography, his failure in the undertaking business, and the reasons which prompted her, the narrator,

to accept him for a husband; the birth of two children with red noses, the image of Mole, both of whom, to use her own expression, she had buried; the unaccountable disappearance of their father, taking with him whatever portable property was in their joint possession, including bed and bedding, an eight-day clock, and a warming-pan; the deceitfulness of the male sex in general, and their sad tendency to falsehood, coupled with inebriety; the inscrutable ways of Providence, by which it seemed ordered that her own sex should be "put upon" in all relations of life; the difficulty, which no one could contradict, of earning bread, as a lone woman, with rent and taxes to pay, everything rising in price except her own labour, and an inflexible determination to keep herself respectable; the matrimonial offer she had received not longer back than five years gone last Easter Monday, from an energetic bargeman, of imposing appearance, and a bad habit of swearing "awful," which offer she could not prudently entertain, partly from uncertainty as to Mole's fate, partly from suspicion of the proposer's solvency, not to say sobriety; the depression of spirits resulting from this disappointment of the affections, and the "lonesomeness" of the cottage in the long winter nights, when she felt as if she "couldn't hardly a-bear it without a drop o' comfort." Finally, the determination she was driven to of taking in a child to nurse "as should make the little place seem homelike, and help to get a livin' for us both."

"And it's past belief, miss," added Mrs. Mole, "as I put a notice in the weekly paper, an' never heard no more till a matter of ten weeks ago, when a gentleman brought this here little lad to the door, and left him for me to nurse and look after, quite

confident and agreeable. 'Mrs. Mole,' says he—'your name's Mole, or I'm misinformed.' 'Yes, sir, says I, 'you're right enough so fur as you know.' 'Mrs. Mole,' says he, 'I leave the child with you, an' I've no call to bid you take care of him, for I see it in your face, and you'll be as good as his own mother to him, supposin' he ever had one.' With that he slips a sovereign into my hand. I'm not deceivin' you, miss, and I drops him a curtsey, an' says I, 'Perhaps you'll favour me,' says I, 'with the babe's name,' says I, 'for I wouldn't call him out of it,' says I. It's my belief, miss, as the gentleman wasn't used to childer', an' didn't make no account of such things as nameses, for he thought a bit, an' 'Moses,' says he, 'that's the boy's name,' says he; but he answers much kinder to Johnnie, miss, as you can see for yourself. He was a hasty gentleman, seemingly, an' harbitary, but a pleasant way with him; an' the child took on an' pined a bit for the first day or two, when he wur gone to London, or what-not, but he loves his old Moley best now, don't ye, deary? an' will tell ye, plain as he can speak, he don't want to leave his old Moley, never no more."

Miss Ross was puzzled. But for the mark on the boy's back, and something in her own heart, she would have believed herself mistaken after all.

Who could this man be, then? and how had he obtained possession of her boy? her boy whom she had mourned so bitterly, believing that he slept beneath the waters of the turbulent Rhone.

"Have you never seen this gentleman again?" she asked, still pressing the child's head to her breast, a position he accepted with perfect equanimity.

"Seen him!" repeated Mrs. Mole. "He comes here once a week regular, and pays, I'll say that for

him—pays like the bank. 'Handsome is as handsome does,' says I, an' he's a real gentleman, I make no doubt."

"Is he young or old?" pursued Miss Ross. "Tall or short? Dark or fair? How is he dressed? In one word—what is he like?"

Mrs. Mole, whose memory and perceptive powers in general were failing a little, thereby affording a wider scope to her imagination, plunged at once into a comprehensive description, much ornamented and idealised, of the person who had lately become so important an object in her quiet, everyday life—a description from which Miss Ross felt she could not have identified any individual simply human; but which was happily cut short by a step on the highroad, and a click at the little green gate giving access to the front door of the cottage.

"It's not his day, miss," said Mrs. Mole, pulling her guest to the window. "But here he is, for sure, and you can judge for yourself."

One glance was enough. Miss Ross, dropping Johnnie (in the safest possible attitude) on the floor, fled to the back kitchen panting for breath.

It was Achille! There could be no doubt about it! The same jaunty air, the same gaudy dress, the same manner, gestures, ways, even to the cigar between his teeth—a little stouter, perhaps, and more prosperous-looking than when she saw him last; but still unmistakably the husband who deceived, outraged, deserted her, to whom, if she were really married, she felt she had better have tied a millstone round her neck, and plunged herself into the sea!

Escape was her first impulse—escape at any price! He must never find her! He must on no account see her here! With a hasty farewell to

Mrs. Mole, who thought all the better of her visitor for the modesty that forbade her to confront a strange gentleman, she vanished through the back door of the cottage, as Picard, for it was no other, entered at the front, and running down a stony path direct to the riverside, found herself wishing only that she could swim, so as to make her plunge, and strike out at once for the opposite shore. Glancing wistfully around, there was yet something in the whole situation that struck her as ludicrous in the extreme. Hemmed in by cottage gardens, escape was out of the question on either side, while to retrace her steps along the stony pathway was to return into the jaws of the enemy. At her feet, the river looked cool, shallow, and inviting. Jin wondered if it would be possible to wade. In her perplexity she clasped her hands and began to laugh. Then she thought of her boy and began to cry. This young person was by no means a subject for hysterics; but her feelings had been cruelly wrought on during the last half-hour, and there is no saying what might have happened if assistance had not arrived at the opportune moment from an unlooked-for quarter.

It has been already stated that Helen Hallaton showed less inclination to go to the races than is usual with a young lady who has a new bonnet in a box upstairs, and an excuse for taking it out. Frank Vanguard too, contrary to all precedent, declined driving his team to the Course, and remained tranquilly in barracks with the orderly officer and the mess waiters, whilst everybody else was off for the day. I do not suppose these young people understood each other; but I fancy they thought they did, and perhaps this was the reason one only started with her companions under pressure,

while the other preferred a skiff and a pair of sculls (not an outrigger, observe, in which there is only room for the oarsman) to the box of his drag, and a sustained contest for many miles with the iron mouth of his near wheeler.

This young officer, then, stripped to the very verge of decency, came flashing up the stream with steady strokes and strong that brought him alongside of Mrs. Mole's cottage within a few seconds of Jin's flight from that sanctuary. It is not to be supposed that any amount of preoccupation would prevent our floating dragoon from resting on his oars to admire the rare and radiant vision : a handsome girl clad in bright transparencies, exhaled, as it would seem, by an ardent sunshine from the teeming margin of Father Thames.

He thought of Rhodes and Helios, and the picture in last year's exhibition. So thinking, he backed water, of course with the utmost energy.

"Captain Vanguard," pleaded a voice he had thought yesterday not without its charm, "will you be a good Samaritan and give me a passage to the Lilies?"

"He would be delighted." Of course he would. To take such a sitter ought to be pleasure enough ; but better still to have so good an excuse for calling at the Lilies and finding Miss Hallaton at home.

"I've been visiting a poor woman in that cottage," said Miss Ross, giving him her hand as she stepped lightly into the fragile barque he brought so skilfully to her feet. "But it really is too hot for walking back along the road. I'm in luck. If I hadn't seen you, I do believe I should have jumped in to swim!"

"I'm the lucky one, Miss Ross," answered Frank, looking very manly and handsome, as with

lengthened strokes he shot into the stream. "I'm very glad now I didn't go to the races. It's as well, too, that I brought this skiff instead of that outrigger!"

And Uncle Joseph, quarrelling fiercely with Punch, beheld it all, boiling, chafing, growling, wondering at the perfidy of woman, cursing the imbecility of man.

CHAPTER X

AFLOAT

IT was a pleasant trip for waterman and freight. Overhanded sculls, light sitter, and buoyant boat, Frank laid himself out to his work as if he liked it; and Miss Ross, dipping her white fingers in the pleasant ripple, looked kindly into the oarsman's eyes, while her lissome figure bent and swayed in graceful unison with his stroke.

Steadily, smoothly, swimmingly, they shot on, through deep, cool, silent shade, where overhanging boughs bent longingly towards the laughing waters as they ran past; across broad, burnished sheets of gold, where dazzling sunshine flashed and glittered on the stream; over placid pools, translucent and serene, where the drooping water-lily, scarce ruffled by a languid petal to kiss the lingering current stealing by; under high fragrant banks, rich in tints of pearl and pink, emerald and ruby, of all the brightest, fairest hues that nature lavishes on the flower, like the gem; past lawn and villa, past water-mill and meadow land, past nibbling sheep

She fanned him with her hat.

and wading cattle, a barking dog, a boathouse, an unsuccessful angler in a punt; and so to a fair expanse of smooth untroubled water, a mile below the lock.

There are voyages on which we all embark unconsciously to ourselves, careless of lifebelt or sea-stores, making no provision for the climes to which they lead; voyages that begin with a fair wind, a summer sea, and a smiling sky; that end, too often, in loss of crew and cargo, in shipwreck, disaster, and despair. Miss Ross, though she scarcely suspected it, had even now set foot on a plank which was to sink with her hereafter, and leave her choking in the dark pitiless waves.

"*Isn't* it nice?" said she, taking off a jaunty little hat to smooth her hair back with dripping hands. "I delight in the motion — something between swimming and riding. I should like to row myself. Don't you find it hard work? You must be tired. Let us stop here a little in the shade."

A longer pull would have failed to tire Frank, who was no mean waterman, and in excellent condition,

"But then the situation had its charm,"

and to rest in the shade with Miss Ross was no unpleasant break in a day's work.

She fanned him with her hat, rocking the boat to and fro as it lay under the bank, sheltered by a thick screen of fragrant, flickering lime branches.

"I can't thank you enough," continued Jin, in her most winning tones. "I'm so fond of the water, I think I was meant for a sailor. I should like to go on it every day."

"I'll take you!" said Frank, as what else could

he say? "Every day, and all day long. Shall we fix to-morrow, at the same place and the same time?" He was laughing, but thought, nevertheless, it would be no bad way of spending the summer, while so unfortunate as to be quartered at Windsor. Ah! if it had only been Helen! But it wasn't. So there was no use in thinking about that!

"We can't always do what we like," answered Jin, looking pensively into the depths of the Thames. "At least women can't — certainly I can't! Think how I should be pitched into when I got home! You wouldn't like me to be scolded for your sake, Captain Vanguard?"

"I think I should," replied the inexcusable young officer. "I think I should like to scold you myself, if I had the right."

"Ah! you'd like making up again, I daresay!" laughed Jin, and, with that, the black eyes delivered one telling shot straight into Frank's, and were instantly averted.

"We'll quarrel as much as you please, on those terms," said he gaily, and, for aught I can guess, might have proceeded to premature reconciliation forthwith, but that she knew the game so well, and checked him at the right moment.

"I quarrel with my *friends*, Captain Vanguard," she objected; "and you are only an acquaintance as yet. It takes me a long time to become really intimate with people. I wonder if I should like you more when I knew you better?"

"I'm sure you would," answered Frank, rattling the boat's chain as he prepared for work again. "You would improve me so, do you see, and I am so willing to be improved. You wouldn't be able to do without me in a week."

"I don't think that would be a good plan," she said, in rather a mournful tone, gazing dreamily at him with her great black eyes, as if she saw miles into the future. "I can take good care of myself—nobody better. But if I like people at all I like them very much. It's my nature — I wish it wasn't."

"Then you don't like *me* at all?" he replied in a low voice, bending down to alter the stretcher at his feet. "Just my luck!" Why couldn't he leave edged tools alone? Like a very child, he must needs play with them, only because they lay to his hand. How we all cut our fingers without the slightest occasion long after we believe ourselves old enough and wise enough to run alone!

"If I did, I shouldn't tell you so," answered Jin, lowering her voice in harmony with his. "Do you think a woman never keeps a secret? Captain Vanguard, I can't quite make you out; you puzzle me more than anybody I know."

Frank, sculling leisurely on, began to think this was very pleasant. It gratified him to suppose there should be depths unfathomed in his character; it flattered him to learn that this clever, accomplished woman had thought it worth while to try and search them to the bottom. Perhaps the exercise flushed it a little, but there was a very becoming colour in his face while he replied—

"The plainest fellow in the world, Miss Ross, and the honestest, as you'll find, when you know me better. I may chaff a little sometimes, like other people, but everybody can tell what's chaff and what's earnest. You can, I'm sure."

She nodded and smiled. "Are you in earnest *now*?" she said, looking with real pleasure into the comely, honest young face.

"I am, I'll swear!" he exclaimed, forgetting that nothing had yet been spoken to be earnest about. "What I think I say, and what I say I mean!"

"I wish—no—I wonder, whether I can believe you," she answered very softly, and again the black eyes seemed to pierce right through his jersey to his heart.

Meanwhile their boat shot merrily over the dead water, urged by her oarsman's skilled and vigorous strokes. Jin watched with critical approval the play of his muscular shoulders, the ease and freedom of his movements, the strength, symmetry, and youthful vitality of the man.

"Do you like poetry?" she asked, after a minute's silence.

"Poetry?" repeated Frank doubtfully. "I don't mind it,"—but qualified the admission by adding, "glees, and songs, and that."

She was rather thinking aloud than speaking to her companion, while she continued—

"I always admire that description of the Scandinavian warrior's accomplishments; there is something so simple about it, and so manly—

> 'These arts are mine, to wield the steel,
> To curb the warlike horse;
> To swim the lake, or skate on heel,
> To urge my rapid course;
> To draw the bow, to fling the spear,
> To brush with oar the main:
> All these are mine, and shall I bear
> A Danish maid's disclaim?'

I wonder, for my part, that the Danish maid could resist him."

"Oh, I don't!" answered Frank. "Danish maids are pretty tough, I should think; spotted too, probably, like Danish dogs. Who did you say the fellow was, and what did he brush?"

"I said he was a soldier," replied Miss Ross demurely. "Most likely a mounted volunteer."

"And who was the lady—the Danish maid, I mean?"

"I don't know—I wish *I* was!" she answered, with a sigh.

Frank pondered, resting on his oars. It was not this young officer's habit to puzzle his wits unnecessarily in the solution of intricate problems, and whatever genius he possessed was in no way akin to that of a mathematician, who takes pleasure in the actual process by which results are worked out. To ride a comrade's horse "truly through" in a steeplechase; to make the most of his own in a run; to lead his squadron straight, and as fast as his colonel would permit; to have his troop at the highest possible pitch of efficiency, befriending the men, pacifying their wives, and keeping an especial eye on buckles; to drive the regimental coach without "putting it over," and never to turn his back on a friend, comprised the simple articles of his creed; nor, until he met Helen Hallaton at her father's house, had it ever entered his head there could be an interest in life more engrossing than regimental duty and field-sports. But he was learning to think now, and, like all beginners, found himself somewhat at sea in the process.

What was this strange, subtle intoxication of the brain, rather than the heart, which stole over him so gently, while he looked in that pale, eager, restless face, not a yard off, over the stretcher yonder, turned so wistfully towards his own, while he caught the tones of that low, pleading voice, blending so musically with the jerk of his oars, the leap and gurgle of the stream beneath his prow? Was this the enchantment he had a vague recollection of as

practised by the Syrens in his schoolbooks, by the Mermaidens of nursery lore, by the Ondines and Lurlines, the Wilis and Walpurgis of the stage? Must he learn so soon, while yet in the flush of youth and hope, that the coquette is immortal as the vampire, equally thirsty, tenacious, and insatiable? Was this the same mysterious influence exercised on him by Miss Hallaton? or was it not rather a dazzling and illusive imitation, resembling truth as the scenery of a theatre resembles nature's landscapes; its tinsel and glitter, the splendour of real gems and gold? Well, it was no use troubling one's head about these matters. If you once begin analysing, what becomes of everything we call pleasure? Who would drink wine if he knew how it was made, or, indeed, a glass of pure water, if he reflected on the mingled gases and impurities of which that innocent element is composed?

Sculling on towards the lock, Frank Vanguard was content to leave his own questions unanswered, and abandon himself to the claims of his companion and the fascination of the hour.

With her it was different. Young in years, Miss Ross was yet an old stager in that broad road between the roses, along which it is all down hill. She had travelled it many a time, usually at her own pace, and, so to speak, with horses perfectly well broke. She knew, none better, each smiling nook, each romantic peep of the country on either side,—this awkward turn, that comfortable resting-place, when to put the drag on with judicious caution, where to make the most of her ground at a gallop. She liked to feel her blood stir to the old familiar pastime once more, liked it none the worse that the team was getting out of her hand, the pace no longer at her own control.

All the while it was no more the real Frank Vanguard who excited these welcome sensations in her ill-regulated mind than it was Uncle Joseph, or young Goldthred, or Punch! Men and women, we are but children in our dearest dreams, and Jin was no wiser than the rest of us. She had dressed her doll in the gaudy habiliments that suited her own taste, and persuaded herself the creation of her fancy was a tangible and existing truth.

Frank Vanguard seemed at present her ideal of the robust Scandinavian, polished up a little and modernised, of course. It would be a duty, she considered, to sacrifice him in accordance with her principles of manslaughter. It would be a pleasure to watch the tortures of her victim at the stake. Perhaps, after all, she would grant him a milder punishment than the rest. She wondered more than ever at the northern girl's insensibility to her stalwart admirer.

"No," she murmured, after a pause, during which Frank had set the boat going once more; "I don't think I should have snubbed him long, if I had been the Danish maid."

"I believe you *are* the Danish maid!" said he. "You're not quite English, I'm sure, though I can't tell how I know. You're not Scotch, for you don't speak the language. Welsh? No. You're scarcely my idea of a Welsh woman; at least, judging by those I've seen with wooden collars and milkpails in London."

"Guess again."

"Irish; that's it. 'Kathleen Mavourneen,' 'Arrah na Pogue,' 'Norah Creina,' and 'The Shan Van Voght'!"

"You might have added 'Teddy, you Gander,'" she replied, laughing. "No; what should make

you think I'm Irish? I never was in Ireland in my life. I don't mind telling *you* I'm more a French woman than anything else. In honest truth, I've no country, no relations, no belongings, no friends," and she carolled out in her rich clear voice—

"I care for nobody, no, not I,
And nobody cares for me."

"That's impossible!" exclaimed Frank, pushing the boat out of certain shallows into which he had inadvertently guided it, with the blade of his oar, and looking over his shoulder to see how far the lock was ahead. "That's simply impossible!" he repeated, as they shot back into deep water, where, nevertheless, the stream ran very swift and strong. "I should say a great many people did. More than you think, I am sure. Steady, Miss Ross! Let him alone, please! He'll swamp us in two seconds, if he tries to come on board. Ah! I thought how it would be; and, of course, she can't swim!"

The last sentence Frank sputtered out with a mouthful of Thames water, shaking his head the while, to clear his eyes, as he came to the surface from an immersion, sudden as involuntary, consequent on the indiscreet proceedings of his passenger. Since the adventure of Leda down to our own times, when Landseer has consigned him to an immortality of suffering in the eagle's clutch, it appears that the swan has been a consistent admirer of beauty, both in and out of his proper element. He drew the car of Venus, he piloted the galley of Cleopatra, he spied Miss Ross glittering like a jewel on the bosom of Father Thames. Exasperated, as it would seem, by Vanguard's good fortune, he made rapidly for the boat containing this treasure, wreathing his neck, ruffling his wings in angry curves, and tearing up the water like a river steamboat. Miss Ross laughed

merrily, and splashed the enemy with considerable energy. The swan advanced, the lady leaned over, Frank backed water hard with one scull, a heavy lurch, a little scream, a sway, a surge, and the rushing stream rose over the boat's side from stem to stern, while a wisp of muslins, a gaudy hat, and a tangle of black hair were already splashing, struggling, sinking, a dozen yards farther down the river in the direction of London and the Nore. Frank was a good swimmer, Miss Ross possessed courage and presence of mind. The shallows were close, and a punt was already putting out from the neighbouring lock, where the man in charge had a view of the accident; nevertheless, it was not without the exertion of considerable strength and skill, without great personal risk, a very sufficient wetting, and the swallowing of at least a quart of dirty water, that Vanguard succeeded in placing the lady on her feet in the shallows before mentioned, thanking Heaven fervently in his heart that they were not five strokes farther off, and that he had been enabled to reach them with his burden by aid of a strong stream running in his favour. Draggled, limp, exhausted, dripping from top to toe, Miss Ross clung tight to her preserver, with the more reason that although the stream here scarcely reached her knees, it ran so hard she found some difficulty in keeping her feet. She behaved, thought Frank, very pluckily and well. No nonsense, no hysterics, no theatrical gratitude of gasps and groans. She held one of his hands, indeed, very tight, and her face was paler than ever, but she only said—

"How stupid of me to upset the boat! What a ducking we've both had, Captain Vanguard! You'll never take me on the water again."

"*Won't* I?" thought Frank, helping her into

the punt which had now come to the rescue, and wondering at the masses of black hair, released and straightened by immersion, that hung round her in such unusual length and volume.

Like most bachelors, Frank entertained exaggerated notions as to feminine delicacy, both of mind and body. In the present instance, he was satisfied that unless Miss Ross could be enveloped in blankets, dosed with hot brandy and water, and taken home on the instant, death must inevitably ensue. Assisted by the lock's-man and his wife, who, without partaking of his fears, joined heartily in his exertions, he had Miss Ross swathed up like a mummy in less than ten minutes; and, by her own desire, helped her to walk the short distance between the lock and the Lilies at as good a pace, and, indeed, almost with the same results, as if they had been waltzing. Frank found so much to think of, that it was not till he reached the gate he remembered his own dishevelled plight, and the unusual costume, or rather want of it, in which he meditated a morning call. Reflecting that his straw hat was gone, that he was bare to the shoulders, that his dress consisted only of a light jersey, flannel trousers, and canvas shoes, the whole of which, after being thoroughly saturated, had dried on a dusty road, he was perhaps hardly disappointed to learn that the ladies were at the races, and nobody had stayed at home except Mrs. Lascelles's maid.

"Then I'll wish you good-bye, Miss Ross," said Frank. "I can't do anything more for you now. Only mind you go to bed till dinner-time, and I hope you haven't caught cold."

"Won't you come in?" asked Miss Ross. "They'll give you some sherry, or brandy, or whatever you ought to have. I'm sure you must want it."

'Never felt so well in my life!" he answered gaily. "Besides, I must go back to recover my floating capital: jacket, hat, boat, stretcher and pair of sculls, not to mention your pretty parasol. They were all swimming different ways when I saw them last, but I daresay they'll get together again on this side of Staines. We landed the cargo, which was the great thing, but I wish we could have managed to keep it dry."

He was turning away with a light laugh, when she called him back. "I've never thanked you," said she, "but I know you risked your own life to-day to save mine. If you had lost it—I—I should like to have gone down too!"

He started. There was a tremble in her voice that seemed very strange to him, nor was the sensation without its charm; but he had not yet contemplated the subject from this romantic point of view, so he could think of no better answer than to put out his hand.

She caught it eagerly, and for one half-second pressed it against her heart, while she murmured—

"Good-bye, Captain Vanguard, good-bye; when shall I see you again?"

The dark, pleading eyes were turned on him so kindly, the pale, bewitching face was drawing so near his own—close, closer yet, as he bent towards it—and so their lips met in one long, clinging, and totally unjustifiable kiss. Then Miss Ross, blushing to her ears, scudded upstairs like a lapwing, while Frank walked dreamily away from the front door, feeling as if he had behaved very badly about something or somebody, and couldn't bring his mind to regret it as he ought.

CHAPTER XI

MANŒUVRING

WE must return to Uncle Joseph, endeavouring to compose his mind by riding Punch at an uncomfortable jogtrot along a succession of shady lanes calculated to bring him back by a roundabout way to his own dwelling-place. This *détour*, much against the pony's inclination,—for that sagacious animal protested at every homeward turn,—he took advisedly and with deliberation, that he might have time to ponder on his position and his wrongs. Like most men who have passed middle age, he set a great value on the blessing of health, and prudently reflected that a towering passion, an obstinate cob, and a broiling sun formed a combination likely to produce one of those bilious attacks which lay the sufferer on his back for a week, and make him as yellow as a guinea for a fortnight. Therefore he thought it wise to cool down in solitude, and consider his own case dispassionately, before deciding on a future line of conduct. Had he been a young man he would have broken with Jin on the spot. Storms of invective, reproach, and recrimination would have ensued, to be succeeded by thorough reconciliation and a subsequent state of slavery more degrading than the first, after much unnecessary wear and tear of body and mind. But Uncle Joseph had arrived at a period of life when, highly as we

prize our hearts, we set also a sufficient value on our livers, and see no reason why lacerated affections should be aggravated by an impaired digestion. There is much knowledge of human nature comprised in Sir John Suckling's shrewd and suggestive stanza—

> "Why so pale and wan, fond lover,
> Prithee, why so pale?
> Will, if looking well can't move her,
> Looking ill prevail?"

That is doubtless the least decisive defeat which is most skilfully concealed, and one of the first principles in manœuvring is to show a front, the steadier the better, however severe may be the loss under which you are compelled to retire.

By the time Uncle Joseph had ridden a mile (and at Punch's pace, when turned away from home, this distance afforded some leisure for reflection) he made up his mind not to put himself in a passion. Ere he had gone two, and settled another difference with the pony by diverse jobs in the mouth and kicks in the stomach, he sought and found many excuses for the young lady's conduct, and almost decided not to quarrel with her at all.

If less agile and less ardent, these mature lovers are, at anyrate, more patient, more considerate, more forbearing, than their impetuous juniors. They take thought, they give time, they make allowances, they have learned one of life's most important lessons, only set forth towards the end of the chapter, "not to expect too much." Could they but keep the smooth skin, the jaunty step, the trim waist, the clear eye, the glossy locks, the buoyancy, the sparkle, and the bloom! Alas! alas! turn it how we will, there is no disputing that the one quality of youth outweighs all advantages of

experience, wisdom, fame, intellect; and that the figure 50, so acceptable in a *rouleau*—

"Sounds ill in love, whate'er it may in money."

While he thus rode along the shady lanes, Uncle Joseph's cogitations, interrupted only by the carelessness and other shortcomings of Punch, jumbled themselves together into something like the following soliloquy:—

"Comes down to breakfast as sulky as a bear; low spirits the women call it, and over-fatigue, but I know what that means — restless manner, wandering eye, and not half an appetite. Scarcely truffles enough, by the way, in that pie; mustn't forget to write about it. (Hold up, you brute. Such another as that and you'll be on the top of your stupid head!) Then off she goes in a desperate fidget to write letters upstairs. Upstairs indeed! I ought to have known at once there was something wrong, for I never remember her in a fidget before; and as for letters, I should suppose she was the worst correspondent in Europe! Then, after everybody's back is turned, off like a shot through the hayfields, under a tropical sun, and down to the river. Some sense in that if she'd jumped in for a cold bath. I shouldn't have pulled her out; yes, I should! The girl's a dear girl, and a pretty one. It mayn't be so bad after all. She could not have looked at me as she did last night, when she pinned the pinks in my buttonhole, unless she liked me. Why does my tailor never put a loop in? Does he think I'm so old nobody gives me flowers, or is he a deep dog, who reflects I ought to have the pull of their being pinned in? She shall never pin one in again for me, though, unless she can give an account of to-day's

doings! What was she about in that cottage, I should like to know, exposing herself to infection of all kinds, and why did she stay so long? Then, who ever heard of a young lady rushing down to the waterside, and jumping into the first boat that passes (I wonder she didn't upset it, and I almost wish she had!), with a half-naked man she never saw before in her life! Who *was* the man, I wonder? I could only make out that he had very few clothes on. Miss Ross! Miss Ross! you are not treating me well! Perhaps you think I'm an indulgent old fool, and only too pleased to let you do as you like. So I would, my pretty Jin, so I would, if I had your perfect confidence, and felt I could depend upon you. I'm not the least a jealous fellow, I know, though of course I don't want you to make up to anybody else; but I shouldn't mind your pretty little coaxing manner, and your flirting ways. In fact, I rather like them. No, I don't, not a bit, so it's no use saying so. But I could be very good to her if she cared for me. Perhaps she doesn't, after all. And yet that seems unlikely. Julia Bright did, and Jemima Fetters, and I think Miss Flouncer would have, if I'd been more in her set. Can I be so much altered since then?" And thus Uncle Joseph, with his reins on the pony's neck, dropping gradually into a walk, pursued a train of varied thoughts, retrospective and otherwise, comprising diverse incongruous subjects—his shares, his dinner, his present hopes, the state of his health, the increasing proportions of his figure, Punch's failings, Jin's perfidy, the columns of his banker's book, wine, tradespeople, double-entry, boyhood's pastimes, manhood's gains, his last investment, and his first romance.

The afternoon began to wane ere Punch's willing

head was in the manger, and Uncle Joseph rang the bell at his own hall-door. The race-goers having returned early, because this, the last day, afforded but a meagre bill of fare for sport, were yet so worn out with the heat that they had retired to their respective dressing-rooms. Was Miss Ross back? Well, sir, Miss Ross came home some time ago, but she seemed to have met with—with something of an accident. No occasion to be alarmed, said the butler, but miss was wet through, however—not a dry stitch on her, the maid told him—and went to her own room at once. Could his master see her? The well-drilled servant thought not. Miss Ross had given orders she was on no account to be disturbed till dinner; and he, the butler, rather opined she had gone to bed; adding, with a sense of what was due to his own importance, that, "for his part, he was thankful it wasn't no worse!"

But Miss Ross had not the least intention of going to bed, nor could she have slept a wink on the softest couch that ever was spread. Busy thoughts were teeming in her brain, strange contradictory feelings thrilling at her heart. She was half pleased with herself, half angry, sometimes absolutely revelling in the recollections of the day, sometimes wishing she had never gone to the cottage at all. In her dark eyes shone a light that told of some new fire kindled within; on her delicate cheek, usually so pale, burned that blush of pleasure which is all the dearer and deeper for being tinged by self-reproach and shame.

Mrs. Lascelles saw the change at a glance, and knew with womanly instinct that something more had happened to her friend than a common river accident, however dangerous it might have been. Without removing her bonnet, she settled herself in

Without removing her bonnet, she settled herself in an arm chair

an arm-chair the moment she entered the other's room, determined to find out everything that had taken place. As the two women sat together in that light, cheerful, prettily furnished chamber, they afforded no unsightly study of effect, as resulting from contrast, of the respective proportion in which feminine attractions are enhanced by dress and *déshabillé*. The fairer beauty wore a costume I am constrained to admire, but shrink from attempting to describe, inasmuch as it seemed to combine the different attractions by which victory is assured at balls, dinners, regattas, races, suburban breakfasts, county archery-meetings, the morning cricket-match, and the afternoon tea. How it was put together, and of what fabric, I am brutally ignorant: you might as well ask me to articulate the anatomy of a humming-bird or describe the dress of a dragon-fly; but I am prepared to protest that it was voluminous, enchanting, transparent, and that there was mauve in it. To have white teeth, red lips, dancing blue eyes, rich brown hair, and a bloom like a peach, is all very well, but does it seem quite fair play to dispose around these natural advantages certain delicate and filmy draperies, that set them off as a summer haze glorifies some Devonshire valley under the noonday sun? "Scaldings!" quoth honest Jack-tar, creeping along the deck with anything that may be spilt. "*Væ victis!*" says Brennus, turning up his moustache at the gates of Rome. "Look out for yourselves, gentlemen!" seems to be the interpretation of either warning, "and make the best terms you can!" For my part, I think it is wise policy to surrender at discretion, and sink point with the first clash of steel.

Mrs. Lascelles, you see, shone in mail and plate; armed, so to speak, at all points. Miss Ross, on

the other hand, was in light skirmishing order,—none the less dangerous, however,—and prepared, you may be sure, for immediate attack. Her black hair fell about her in shining folds, over a white surface fretted with frills and laces, set off by knots of cherry-coloured ribbon; a band of the same hue was drawn loosely round her slender waist; open sleeves disclosed a pair of ivory arms to the elbows; and she had slippers on, but no stockings. I think I have described her enough.

"So he pulled you out, dear, just as you were sinking, propped you in his arms, with your head on his shoulder, and both did the regular stage business, of course: 'My precious!'—'my preserver!'—'awakened feelings!'—'eternal gratitude!' and a duet at the footlights. Seriously, Jin, it is quite a romance in these prosaic days."

Mrs. Lascelles found herself amused as well as interested by the glowing colours, not devoid of caricature, in which Miss Ross described her late adventure and its hero.

"Nothing of the kind," protested Jin, with energy. "On the contrary, I never saw a man take anything so quietly. You'd think he pulled people out of the Thames once a week. I don't suppose the thing will ever enter his head again."

"That would be very uncomplimentary, my dear," answered Mrs. Lascelles; "and you can't really suppose anything of the sort. Now, honour! Don't you expect him to call here to-morrow morning, the very first thing after breakfast?"

"Why shouldn't he?" replied Jin hotly. "It wouldn't follow that he meant more than an act of common courtesy, which he must have paid any lady after so—so ludicrous a performance as ours!"

Here she burst out laughing, but did not thereby in the least deceive her friend.

"Jin," said the latter, after a pause, during which each had scanned the other narrowly, "what do you think of him?"

"Think of who?" said Jin. It was bad grammar, but people are very obstinate about grammar in common conversation, particularly when they turn away their heads with a blush.

"Who?" repeated Mrs. Lascelles. "Why, this new admirer, of course. This hero, perhaps I ought rather to say, this Leander, this Windsor Bridge swan, this duck of a dragoon! Shall you be able to abide by our compact, and treat him like the rest? Jin, Jin, I should be sorry for you, my poor girl, very sorry, of course, but yet I should laugh, I am afraid, too, if you were to be caught at last, and fall in love—souse!—as you fell into the Thames!"

"I don't know what you mean," answered Miss Ross, with great dignity. "The one I couldn't help, and it would have been hard on me to be drowned. If I did the other, I should deserve never to get my head above water again."

"After all, I don't see why it should be so inexcusable," pursued her tormentor. "Though they have not had such a chance as yours, depend upon it, lots of others are after him. He's a strong enterprising young man, as you've reason to admit. Nobody can deny his good looks, and though he hasn't a superfluity of brains, he's always very well dressed."

"You wouldn't have said so if you had seen him today," laughed Miss Ross. "My dear, he was almost ready for bathing long before he jumped out of the boat. But seriously," she resumed with imposing

gravity, "I have no secrets from you, Rose, and I don't wish you of all people to carry away a false impression of me or my opinions. About Captain Vanguard's good looks I know nothing, for I've never considered them, and as for his being stupid, that I'm sure he's not. Decidedly well read, I should say, from his conversation. However, that's not the question. He has done me a very great service, the greatest probably that one human being can do another; for, though I laugh at it now, it seemed no laughing matter, I assure you, while that dreadful whirl of water was filling mouth and nose and ears; but if you think I am so missyish that I consider it necessary to fall in love with Captain Vanguard because he saved me from drowning, why you never were more mistaken in your life. He's a gentleman, Rose, and a fine fellow, I freely admit. I shall always feel grateful to him, and look on him as a friend, but as for being in *love* with him—bosh! Knowing me as well as you do, Rose, I wonder you can talk such nonsense!"

From all which vehemence, and especially from the gratuitous energy of her friend's denial, I think Mrs. Lascelles was justified in entertaining a strong impression the very reverse of that which was intended to be conveyed.

Her opinion gained strength from the readiness with which Jin accepted a suggestion that it might be more prudent to remain another day at the villa, instead of returning to London on the morrow, taking into consideration the afternoon's excitement, the hot weather, and the comfort of their present quarters.

"My dear, I should like to stay a month!" exclaimed Miss Ross. "It's a paradise on earth for scenery. Uncle Joseph's the best host in the

universe, and we're all so happy. Besides, London is too detestable in this weather. I declare to you, Rose, it was hotter last week than I ever felt it in the south of France."

Mrs. Lascelles pondered, reflecting that she, too, had liked her visit very much. It was pleasant enough to keep her hand in by laying siege to Sir Henry, no great infliction to accept the slavish adoration of Goldthred. If these could be induced to remain, a few days might pass very agreeably at the Lilies, and Uncle Joseph, of course, would only be too happy to keep them as long as they liked.

"But our London engagements," said she doubtfully.

"There are none for the next week we need mind throwing over," replied Jin, whose memory was always to be depended on. "A heavy dinner at Lord Gasper's—twenty people we don't know, not a man under forty, and all the windows shut. Mrs. Potterton's concert — second-rate company, third-rate singers, two hundred people asked, and sitting-room for fifty. Lady Jericho's drum—small and early, like young potatoes; she'll be mortally affronted, and won't ask us again; but she's not going to give anything more this season, so that don't signify! Dear Rose, it would be very nice. Let us stay."

Now, in justice to Miss Ross, I feel bound to insist that this sudden hatred of London gaiety, and passion for rural scenery, was not due solely to her adventure with Frank Vanguard. One of the strongest motives that can sway a woman's feelings prompted her to remain in the neighbourhood of Mrs. Mole. To have seen her long-lost child for one short hour, to have held him in her arms, set him on her knees, and folded his curly little head to her bosom, was

like a mouthful of water to a man fainting from thirst, delightful, invigorating, life-restoring, but creating an insupportable craving for more.

It may be that this interview had softened Jin's whole moral being, rendering her more susceptible to the gentler emotions of her nature, against which she had long waged unnatural war. It may be that in the subjection of Frank Vanguard she hoped to acquire another vassal, or at least an ally, against the time when she might want to summon all her forces for the furtherance of her plans. Perhaps she had many reasons, perhaps she had none at all, but acted, woman-like, on her instinct and her desires. However this may be, she brought out all her powers of persuasion to fortify her friend in the plan that seemed so delightful, of remaining yet a while longer at the Lilies; but I must leave to those who understand a woman's nature, if such philosophers there be, the task of explaining why Jin should have felt at this moment less affection, less gratitude to Mrs. Lascelles, and altogether less dependence on her benefactress, than during the whole of their previous acquaintance.

Dinner that day, at least until the champagne had circulated, was less lively than usual. Everybody seemed silent and preoccupied. Sir Henry, to use his own expression, had not "got out" in time on one of the principal races, and as the favourite was never in the hunt, being beaten half a mile from home, the baronet experienced a double annoyance, of losing his money, and feeling also that he had been less astute than his neighbours when he suffered Outrigger to carry a large stake for him in the Thames Handicap. Mrs. Lascelles, watching his face narrowly, began to torment herself, but taking her tone from his, these two presently

recovered their equanimity. Sir Henry liked champagne, and drank it freely. The exhilarating tendency of that agreeable wine, acting on the buoyancy of his disposition, soon put dull care to flight, and before dinner was half over he had forgotten ill-luck, losses, and embarrassments, and disposed himself to grasp the enjoyments of the present as only such natures can.

But not all the wine that ever was corked at Epernay could have enlivened Uncle Joseph after the disclosures of to-day. He hardly spoke to Miss Ross before they sat down; and when she offered him the usual little posy for his buttonhole, refused the flowers with a rudeness that would have been brutal but for the wounded feelings his petulance revealed. Truth compels me to admit that, notwithstanding his mercantile probity, Uncle Joseph scarcely behaved like an honest man in the present transaction. He was not really half so angry as he pretended to be; but remembering, in his previous experience, that such little quarrels often cleared the way to mutual understanding and goodwill, he resolved to stick by the precepts of that great amatory authority, Ovid with the Nose, and prepare, by a good dose of sulks to-night, for a *redintegratio amoris* to-morrow.

Jin, on the contrary, whose present idea it was to keep all her irons in the fire, suffering no profusion of birds in the bush to distract her entirely from the one in hand, proceeded to approach and circumvent her host as craftily as a Scotch keeper stalks an old cock grouse in October. She gazed on him at intervals with mournful curiosity, withdrawing her eyes the instant they met his glance. She sighed, she talked *at* him, she even tried to flirt a little with Goldthred, something in the day's

adventures preventing her from sharpening her weapons on Sir Henry; as a last resource, she affected headache and extreme fatigue, while she related, with touching frankness, the accident she had sustained, making light of its danger, and most ungratefully ignoring the gallantry of her preserver.

But all to no purpose—she deceived nobody. Uncle Joseph grew crustier every moment, and Sir Henry, who was easily amused, smiled as he bethought him that, but for the good looks of the lady, this ill-matched couple reminded him forcibly of a monkey and a bear.

Goldthred, I need hardly observe, was always the same in the presence of his mistress, absent, confused, over-polite, and prone to blush at short notice. At no time did he aspire to be a vivacious companion, but in the company of Mrs. Lascelles he became simply idiotic.

Helen, too, seemed absent and preoccupied; of course, with the old excuse, that she was over-tired. The weather had been so hot, the road so dusty! and if she *had* indeed expected to meet Captain Vanguard on the Heath, his absence might perhaps have been accounted for more satisfactorily than by the recital of his adventure with Miss Ross, which met her immediately on her return. Dinner, therefore, in spite of the cook's undoubted talents, progressed but heavily, and with long intervals of silence, dispiriting in the extreme.

Later, in the drawing-room it was worse. A light rain prevented egress on the lawn, intrusive cockchafers, buzzing in at the open windows, blundered drowsily about the lights; and—an unusual circumstance—when coffee came, it was not only thick, but cold. The gentlemen were sleepy, or pretended to be; Miss Ross was too tired to sing;

and Helen sat by herself, turning over the leaves of a photograph book.

Even Mrs. Lascelles found her animal spirits unequal to the pressure, and, at an earlier hour than usual, made signals to retire for the night.

Standing on the stairs, with a bedroom candle in her hand, she could not forbear expressing to Miss Ross the sense of depression and low spirits under which she laboured.

"If we're all to be as deadly-lively at Cliefden to-morrow," said she, "our picnic won't be much fun. I believe I shall follow your example, my dear, and drop quietly into the Thames."

"To come up again at Cremorne!" replied Jin, yawning drearily. "I'm completely done up, Rose, and tired out. Good-night."

Notwithstanding this protestation, however, Miss Ross lay awake many a long hour after the other inmates of the Lilies, thinking, wishing, doubting, for the first time in her life mistrusting her own powers, and fearing there was a task before her she would be unequal to perform.

CHAPTER XII

THE SYREN

COULD these be the same people assembled round a white tablecloth, held down at the four corners by judicious pebbles, and covered as yet only with plates and glasses, though hampers, half unpacked, much litter of straw and scatter of paper, denoted that a plentiful feast was in progress of preparation? The ice had not melted, nor were the eggs broken, while even the salt had been remembered by a careful caterer, who bethought him also of borage for the claret-cup, and mint-sauce for the cold lamb. Last night's rain had cooled the air, though scarce a cloud now flecked the calm, blue heaven, and a dazzling sky burnished the Thames into floods of reflected sunshine. Beautiful Cliefden seemed to realise the poet's dream of a very Arcadia, rich in gleams of light and deep cool masses of shade, in flicker of leaf, ripple of stream, and song of birds; bright in the prime of her June loveliness, decked with all her wealth of wood and water, clad in her holiday attire of green and gold.

By the courtesy of one of the kindest and most generous of peers, the party from the Lilies had permission to land and hold their revels in this earthly paradise. Uncle Joseph himself dressing the salad with great pomp and ceremony, vowed

"the Duke was a trump of the first water; and if ever he could give him a turn, he would!"

That gipsy Jin had once more coaxed her elderly admirer into perfect good-humour and a return of entire confidence in herself. This desirable reconciliation was effected by the frankness in which she asked to sit by his side on the voyage hither, a distinction he was too angry to offer, and a position indeed of no slight constraint and inconvenience, inasmuch as he insisted on steering the boat, occupying for that purpose a scanty perch, as little adapted to his proportions as would have been the five-pound saddle in which a slim subaltern or undergraduate rides a hurdle-race.

Here, like lissome Vivien twining herself about her Merlin's feet, she coaxed him into good-humour in ten minutes. Perhaps yesterday's practice on the river had served to keep her hand in. No sooner were they fairly under weigh, and the attention of the others distracted by a passing barge, than she nestled to his side, crossed two taper forefingers under his nose, and looking up in his face with a glance that mingled affection and reproach in deadliest proportions, murmured the single monosyllable, "Why?"

Uncle Joseph, neglecting his rudder, melted visibly. All the oars on stroke side touched ground at once, and No. 2 caught a crab. Still he did not choose to surrender over-hastily, and pulling hard at his tiller-ropes, replied in a hoarse whisper—

"Miss Ross, you know your own business best, but I don't think you treat me quite on the square."

"*Miss Ross!*" she repeated, and again those black reproachful eyes would have pierced a rhinoceros, crackling and all. "I thought you were never to call me by that hateful name again. I'm

always to be 'Jin.' Always, even when you're angry with me. And, to tell you the truth, I shouldn't have liked you *not* to mind about what I did yesterday, though indeed it wasn't my fault."

"Now, then, look ahead!" For a minute or two Uncle Joseph could think of nothing but an Eton eight flashing down stream at the rate of twelve miles an hour, threatening to cut him in two from stem to stern unless he got out of the way. Not till this water-dragon was half a mile off did he recover composure to put the pertinent question, "When you went out yesterday, did you expect to meet Captain Vanguard on the river?"

"You *know* I didn't," exclaimed Jin; "it's cruel to ask me!" Then out came a long story, well-conceived, deftly constructed, and told with such downcast glances, in such low pleading murmurs, with such pretty little flashes of pique, and shades of penitence, and sparkles of fun, all repressed and toned down not to be overheard, that, had the success of their voyage depended on the steersman, I fear boat and crew and passengers might have come to disastrous shipwreck at least a dozen times between Maidenhead-reach and Cliefden landing-place.

But Jin at anyrate succeeded in gaining a temporary haven, and dropped her anchors to-day in Uncle Joseph's breast with a sense of triumph that such moorings never afforded her before.

Mrs. Lascelles meanwhile had taken possession of Sir Henry, leaving Miss Hallaton to the enforced attentions of Goldthred. Helen, I believe, in her heart would have given a good deal to change places with "bow,"— a sturdy knave, brawny, deep-chested, and curly as a retriever; nor was she incapable of handling an oar for a short distance

almost as effectually as that skilled waterman. It would have been at least a relief from her companion, whose politeness nevertheless was unimpeachable as his conversation was correct and monotonous in the extreme.

Such a dialogue as the following would have excited her mirth, but that Helen just now seemed to have lost all sense of the ludicrous, with her spirits, energy, and general interest in life :—

"Don't you enjoy the water on a day like this, Miss Hallaton?"

"Immensely."

"There seems no chance of rain at present. I think the fine weather will last us now till the moon changes."

"Probably."

"That's a great advantage, you know, for the people who have already got their hay down."

"Undoubtedly."

"How smooth the boat goes, Miss Hallaton. A smooth row is—is—much smoother, isn't it, and pleasanter, than a rough one?"

"Certainly."

"And this is a very nice row, I think," continued Goldthred, encouraged by an approving glance from Mrs. Lascelles, to whom his eyes, like his thoughts, were continually turned,— which accounted, indeed, for the abnormal idiotcy of his conversation. "I shall be almost sorry when we get to Cliefden ; shan't you?"

"Oh no!" exclaimed Helen, truthfully enough, but with a fervency that startled herself, and caused her companion to retire from any further attempts at small talk in confusion and dismay.

Sir Henry caught his daughter's eye, and could not help laughing. Perhaps, much as he loved her,

the only feeling of his child in which he could thoroughly sympathise, was a certain susceptibility, inherited from himself, of being bored, and a tendency to adopt the ridiculous view even of so distressing a calamity.

He felt for her at present all the more that his own position was perfectly to his taste—smoking an excellent cigar, propped by soft cushions, with the summer sky above, the lap and wash of the cool water around, pleasant company, a good luncheon in prospect, and a pretty woman, half in love with him, shading his face with her parasol, while her soft tones murmured in his ear. Sir Henry did not care how long the voyage lasted, though prepared to accept its conclusion with the greater resignation that their party was to be reinforced at Cliefden by a few agreeable acquaintances eking out the end of a gay Ascot week, and a sprinkling of young officers from Windsor.

The latter addition was a bright thought of Mrs. Lascelles, who, being thoroughly good-natured, intended it especially for Helen's gratification. But, as she had no time to receive answers to her notes of invitation before starting, and, like most women, imagined military duties ceaseless and unvarying, she said nothing about the warlike element for fear it should be unattainable, forbearing to raise the young lady's hopes only that they might be destroyed. "I didn't like being disappointed myself when I was a girl," thought Mrs. Lascelles. "I'm not sure I like it a bit better now."

She was getting very fond of Helen, believed in her goodness, admitted her beauty, and was, perhaps, the only person in the world who thought her the image of her father.

In all matters of affection Mrs. Lascelles was

clear-sighted enough, and it did not escape her that Helen's spirits, during the last day or two, had sunk lower than was natural at her time of life under no more sedative influences than sunshine and dust. It was partly to rouse the girl from her depression, as well as for purposes of her own, that she commanded Goldthred to place himself at Miss Hallaton's disposal ; but certain suspicions that the young lady required a more warlike vassal than this obedient slave, were much strengthened by the light that sparkled in her eyes when, nearing Cliefden, a group of gentlemen became visible on the landing-place, in the midst of whom she could not mistake the shapely form of Frank Vanguard.

Mrs. Lascelles, you see, had a good afternoon's work on hand. A score of people to entertain, couples to pair, flirtations to encourage, and Jin's vagaries to overlook, lest she should drive Uncle Joseph beyond the bounds of patience ; besides keeping Sir Henry at her own apron-string, while enacting the part of a blue-eyed Cleopatra to that laziest and least warlike of Antonys.

Half a dozen swinging, vigorous jerks, an exclamation of pleasure from the passengers, an "Easy all!" in gruff syllables from "stroke," and the galley poised her oars, as a seabird spreads her pinions ere she folds them to alight. The officers cheered, the ladies chattered, greetings were exchanged, muslins shaken out, parasols unfurled—a cool air stole across the water, a blackbird struck up from the copse, the leaves danced, the boat danced, the sunshine danced, the scene was all colour, motion, and variety, like a ballet after Watteau, set to music by Offenbach.

In these days it is the affectation of society to be natural, and nobody can dispute the advantage

of such a change from that pompous reserve and frozen insensibility which represented good breeding some five-and-twenty years ago. The party gathered round their tablecloth on the grass at Cliefden, if more polished, were as joyous and merry as so many lads and lasses at a fair. Of course it took some little time before luncheon could be got ready, of course it was necessary to walk about during the interval, of course people paired off for that purpose. Nobody goes to a picnic, I imagine, with the view of discussing grave subjects in full conclave—forbid it! faun and satyr, nymph and dryad, forest fairy and bottle imp, the genius of the woodland, the goblin of the cave, all the spirits of the hamper, the corkscrew, and the rill!

No; for us seniors, let there be flowing cups, though temperate, cooled with ice, and spiced with fragrant herbs—a cunning pasty, a piece of resistance, thus named because irresistible, egg-sandwiches, French mustard, a currant-tart, and a parti-coloured *mayonnaise*. So shall we flavour the repast with quip and jest, with merry, quaint conceit and pointed anecdote, pleasant or pathetic, yet, in pity, not too long! But, as for you young people, off with you, while we uncork the wine! Climb the bank, if you know it, "whereon the wild thyme grows"; dive into the recesses of the forest, its paths are only wide enough for two;

> "Look in the lily-bell, ruffle the rose,
> Under the leaves of the violet peep."

Reflect how pleasant it is to gather strawberries with a Mademoiselle Thérèse in the wood of Malieu.

> "Quand on est deux,
> Quand on est deux,"

make the most of your golden hour, but come back again ere you have kept your elders waiting too

long for luncheon, ere you yourselves have said or done anything that shall cause a moment's regret in the reaction that comes after happiness, as surely as darkness follows day.

Uncle Joseph, I have said, was preparing the salad, therefore Miss Ross found herself at liberty to indulge in such devilries as were consistent with the Satanic element in her nature. It was not likely she would abstain from a shot or two at Frank Vanguard, if only to get the range, as it were, of her batteries previous to real work. She accosted him with exactly the right mixture of diffidence and interest, held his hand for just one second more than enough; and even contrived to raise a blush on her pale face, while, meeting his eyes very shyly, she whispered, in answer to his inquiries—"I haven't caught cold, and I'm none the worse, and certainly none the better! And I shouldn't at all mind undertaking the whole expedition over again."

Why wasn't it Helen? Again, through growing interest and gratified vanity, rose almost unconsciously that wistful thought; but Helen saw it all, and bit her lip, looking very cold and pale, whilst she turned from his greeting with a distant bow, beseeching Mr. Goldthred, whom, it now occurred to her, she had treated with less than civility, to gather her a water-lily floating near the bank, and so detaching him from the others, unintentionally constituted him her pair. These things are soon done, you see, when people pounce for partners as if they were playing puss-in-the-corner, and nobody wants to be left out in the cold.

The moments were very precious, and would have passed even more quickly than they did, but that the couples were all hungry, and quite as ready

for luncheon as lovemaking. Sir Henry, indeed, absolutely refused to move a step from the shady nook in which he had ensconced himself, and Mrs. Lascelles made her position as hostess an excuse for not accompanying a beardless subaltern in a climb after ferns up a perpendicular bank, feathered to the top with those graceful exotics of the forest. This enterprising youth, not yet dismissed the riding-school, thought it incumbent on him to place his cheerful society at her disposal, whom he irreverently designated "the loudest swell of the lot"; but seemed relieved, nevertheless, by her refusal of his attentions, and subsided with extreme goodwill into his cornet-a-piston—an instrument on which he played sundry negro melodies with great enjoyment and no contemptible execution.

It had been agreed that, directly luncheon was ready, he should summon the stragglers by performing a popular air called "The Roast-beef of Old England," into which, as he threatened, he threw his whole mind, embroidering it with masterly variations founded on a call well known in barracks as the solemn warning—

> "You'll lose your pudding and beef, my boys,
> You'll lose your beef and pud—ding."

Goldthred had only wetted one sleeve to the shoulder, and thrust the corresponding foot ankle-deep in mud, while fishing water-lilies for Miss Hallaton, ere these welcome sounds released him from attendance, and he brought her back in triumph—looking to Mrs. Lascelles, as little Jack Horner might, from the corner in which he boasted "What a good boy am I!" She rewarded him as you reward a retriever, if not too wet, by giving him her shawl to take care of.

Uncle Joseph, too, had been so engrossed with

the salad, that Miss Ross was at his elbow again almost before he missed her, though, short as had been her absence, I cannot doubt she made the best use of her time.

Much may be done, if I remember right, in a few minutes, when paths are steep as well as narrow, when glades are deep and dark even under a mid-summer sun, when two people are inclined, if only for pastime, to engage in that game from which a loser so often rises under the impression that he has won.

It was the old story—Miss Ross, with all her craft, was playing stakes she could ill afford. In the attachments, as in other relations of life, wise is that aphorism of the canny Scot, "Reach not out your hand farther than you can draw it back again." Ere she rejoined the others, Jin felt she must win at any sacrifice, she could not get her hand back now; she would not if she could.

Frank, sitting down to cut open a pigeon pie, felt half pleased, half penitent. Like a child being tickled, he was inclined both to laugh and to resist.

He looked remorsefully across the tablecloth at Miss Hallaton, but that perverse young woman, obstinately avoiding his glance, persisted in being amused by the cornet-player's buffooneries, wishing drearily all the while that she had never come. Frank thought he too could be indifferent; so the breach widened, from the breadth of the tablecloth to a gulf that could only be bridged over by loving memories and painful thoughts, as the lake is spanned by the rainbow that owes its very existence to a shower of Nature's tears.

Undoubtedly there is a deal of self-love mixed up with these tender woes and joys. If vanity

constitutes much of their pleasure, surely it produces more than half their pain. *Plus aloes quam mellis habet*, says the Roman satirist; and perhaps, after all, the honey would be very insipid without the sting.

But a picnic is no place for indulgence of reflection or regret. The party had landed at Cliefden for enjoyment, and were determined to grasp the shadow of happiness if not the substance thereof. So corks flew and tongues wagged merrily, the cold lamb waned, the *mayonnaise* disappeared, the currant tart bled freely.

"And when the pie was opened, the birds began to sing," so, at least, said the young subaltern, now in a state of exceedingly high spirits; "and why shouldn't the ladies?" he added, looking round him with condescending affability. "I'll accompany any or all of them to any tune or in any direction she pleases. Though I'm humble, I'm industrious; and if I seem too weak for the place, you must suit yourselves 'elsewheres'; for, to do man's work, I must have man's wages, and I ain't half so soft as I look!"

"You're a very impudent boy," said Mrs. Lascelles, laughing; "but you're rather good fun, and it's not a bad suggestion. Now, who will give us a song?"

There seemed rather a lack of volunteers. The original proposer vowed he could neither drink nor sing unless after a lady. He was shy, he said, and blushed under his skin, therefore nobody gave him credit for modesty. Helen felt something in her throat that warned her she must burst out crying, unless she kept it down. One had a cold, others could not remember any words, so it soon came round to Miss Ross, "who was always so good-

natured; everybody was sure she wouldn't disappoint them!"

Jin never made any fuss about her singing.

"What shall it be?" she asked Uncle Joseph, who never knew one tune from another, but vastly enjoyed the proprietorship inferred by such an appeal.

"Oh, that pretty air from the — the — Well, you know the one I mean; or, or—anything you please, dear Miss Ross; they're all charming." And Uncle Joseph passed his cigar-case round, with the look of a man who had acquitted himself handsomely of a difficult and delicate task.

"I'll sing you a new one I got the other day," said Jin, flashing another of her dangerous glances through the smoke that was curling round Frank Vanguard's comely face. "It's called, 'Yes—I like you,' and there's a moral in it. Thanks! It does best without an accompaniment," and looking very bewitching as she pushed her hair back, she began—

YES—I LIKE YOU.

"When I meet you, can I greet you
With a haughty little stare?
Scarcely glancing where you're prancing
By me on the chestnut mare.
Still dissembling, though I'm trembling,
Thus you know we're trained and taught.
For I like you, doesn't it strike you?
Like you more than p'raps I ought!
Yes—I like you, doesn't it strike you?
Like you more than p'raps I ought!

When I meet you, must I treat you
As a stranger, calm and cold,—
Softer feeling, half revealing,—
Are you waiting to be told?
D'you suppose, sir, that a rose, sir,
Picks itself to reach your breast?
And I like you, doesn't it strike you?
Like you more than all the rest.
Yes—I like you, etc.

When I meet you, I could eat you,
Dining with my Uncle John ;
Sitting next you, so perplexed, you
Ought to guess my heart is gone.
While I'm choking, 'tis provoking
You can munch, and talk, and drink.
Though I like you, doesn't it strike you?
Like you more than you may think!
Yes—I like you, etc.

When I meet you, I could beat you,
For your solemn face and glum.
Don't you see, sir, you are free, sir,
I have all the worst to come!
Mother's warning, sister's scorning—
Qualms of prudence, pride and pelf.
Oh! I like you—doesn't it strike you?
Like you more than life itself!
Yes—I like you," etc.

There was no mistaking the hint conveyed in this touching ditty; but whether he accepted it or not, the song was hardly concluded ere Frank took leave of the company. Certain regimental duties, he said, looking hard at Helen, required his presence in barracks, and therefore he had come on horseback, so as to return at his own time. He regretted it extremely, of course. He had spent a delightful day, and could not thank his entertainers enough. This civil little speech he addressed indeed to Uncle Joseph and Mrs. Lascelles, but his eyes sought Miss Hallaton's the while, and their imploring expression cut her to the heart.

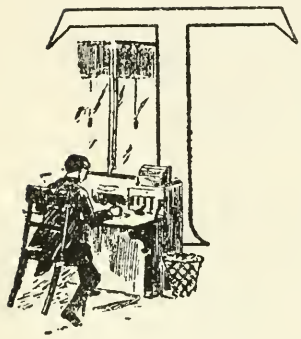
There is a code of signals in use amongst young people situated as these were, far more intelligible than that employed by her Majesty's Navy or the Royal Yacht Squadron. They never shook hands, they exchanged no good-bye, but Helen hoisted something in reply to his flag of distress that appeared perfectly satisfactory to both. Though Miss Ross looked longingly after him as he went

away, Frank never turned to meet her glance; and Helen thoroughly enjoying the homeward trip at sunset, seemed in better spirits, and more like herself than she had been all day.

Mrs. Lascelles was puzzled. She had missed the exchange of signals, and could not make it out.

CHAPTER XIII

SUNDAY IN LONDON



THERE is a late train from Maidenhead to Paddington that always reminds me of Charon's barque chartered to carry deceased passengers across the Styx. It seems, like that fatal ferry-boat, to fix a limit between two separate stages of existence, —the river, the flowers, the cup, the pleasant friends, the tender well-wisher, in short, "the bright precincts of the cheerful day," and that dark region, forbidding though unavoidable, where we meet our fellow-creatures on more equal, more practical, more distant, and more uncomfortable terms.

Goldthred, who was obliged to be in London the same night, sank into the lowest depths of despondency while bidding adieu to Mrs. Lascelles and her party, as they embarked under a purple sunset for their homeward voyage. He felt sadly alone in the world, even at the station, and getting into a vast and gloomy compartment, of which he was sole occupant, under a dim lamp, began to reflect seriously on life and its vexations. His cigars were done, his boots were wet, he suffered

from headache, heartache, and premonitory symptoms of a dreadful disorder called the fidgets. Had he only known that Frank Vanguard, who got in at Slough, was in the very next carriage, how gladly would he have communicated with that migratory young officer, by knocking, shouting, or any other riotous mode of attracting attention; but, for aught he could tell, there was no passenger in the train but himself, and the sense of solitude became nearly insupportable. Passing Hanwell, he found himself envying the unfortunate inmates their varied society, and the liveliness of their manners. Goaded at last by his reflections, and summoning that most daring of all courage which is furnished by despair, he resolved to turn over a new leaf, to assert himself and his own value, to push the siege briskly, and asking Mrs. Lascelles an important question point-blank, stand or fall by her answer like a man. *Se faire valoir*, he well knew, was the winning game; but, alas! the more precious the heart the lower the price it seems to place on itself, and Goldthred, with all his shortcomings, possessed in his character a vein of the true metal, which makes men honest servants if not successful masters. Taking counsel, then, of his very fears, he determined to open the trenches by organising another picnic, somewhere lower down the river, to which he would invite all the party of to-day, and such other additions from London as he considered worthy of the honour. Miss Hallaton, of course. Nice girl, Miss Hallaton, and civil to him! Distant, but that was manner. Ah! she would make a charming wife to a fellow who admired that kind of beauty. It was not *his* style, of course; and with this reflection, the image of a lovely laughing face, and a

pair of kind blue eyes, seemed to brighten even the gloom of his dismal railway carriage.

Thinking of Mrs. Lascelles somehow called Sir Henry unpleasantly to mind. And he bethought him how that easy-going personage had expressed certain vague intentions of starting on an expedition of his own, to see some yearlings, leaving his daughter at the Lilies. "Then I'll write to Miss Hallaton herself," thought Goldthred. "Why shouldn't I? That will prevent the possibility of a mistake, and perhaps Mrs. Lascelles won't quite like it. I wonder if she would care. I *couldn't* make her unhappy, the angel, to save my life, but I wish I was sure I had the power."

By the time he reached Paddington, Goldthred's spirits had risen considerably, as is usually the case with a man who has resolved to take his own part; and, after extricating an overblown rose from his buttonhole, and planting it carefully in the neck of his water-bottle, he went to bed, feeling keenly that the time was fast approaching to decide his fate, and that the next week, or say, perhaps, ten days, must settle his business and make him a man or a mouse.

In pursuance of this desperate resolution, he rose the following morning in time for church, and betook himself after service to his usual Sunday resort, the Cauliflower Club. Here, seated at a desert of a writing-table, in a vast and dismal library, he had an opportunity of comparing the gloom that reigned within and without this sanctuary of his sex. Foreigners can seldom recall unmoved the memories of a Sunday in London. Whether it is because the shops are shut, or the streets unwatered, or the upper classes invisible, I know not, but certainly on that holy day of rest

and rejoicing, our bustling Metropolis looks grim and deserted as a city of the dead. Doubtless everybody goes out of town that can. Those who remain, thinking it, I presume, either eccentric or wicked to be seen abroad, hide themselves with extraordinary caution and success. The same dulness seems to pervade all parts of the town, except, perhaps, those very poor districts in which vice and want allow their vassals no change, no relaxation from the daily round of dirt, discomfort, and sin. You may traverse Tyburnia and scarce meet a human creature. Belgrave Square is sombre and noiseless as the catacombs. A single hansom represents traffic, vitality, and commercial prosperity throughout Mayfair, Piccadilly, and St. James's Street. Go into Hyde Park, you will observe one solitary soldier, and his inevitable maid-servant, carrying her prayer-book wrapped in a cotton pocket-handkerchief. Search Kensington Gardens, you will find that beautiful woodland occupied by a sleeping ragamuffin, a child with its sister, and a wandering female of weak intellect. From Brompton to Billingsgate, from Mary-le-bone to the Minories, you will discover as few passengers as you would see flies on a pane of glass at Christmas. What becomes of the winter bluebottles I do not pretend to say, but of the two-legged insects pervading our earth, I imagine that on Sundays the males retire, like Goldthred, in countless swarms to their clubs. Nevertheless, while he wrote the invitations, particularly Miss Hallaton's, with exceeding care and a hard-nibbed pen, he found himself the only occupant but one of the magnificent apartment, devoted to literary labour by a judicious committee presiding over the economy of the Cauliflower. Of the student thus

sharing his solitude, and who might or might not be an intimate acquaintance, nothing was visible but the back of a curly brown head, as its wearer lay buried in an enormous sofa, reading, or more probably asleep. Club-manners, except in certain professional circles where members are bound by their trade in a common brotherhood, forbidding such outrages, Goldthred, even had he been inclined, must have forborne from hurling books across the room, stealing behind to flirt ink on his face, or adopting other such playful modes of attracting notice, and assuring himself of the gentleman's identity, so he continued to write with precision and perseverance, leaving the room when he had finished, without discovering that its other occupant was Frank Vanguard.

The two men were scarcely twenty feet apart, they could have assisted each other considerably in their respective objects, they were thinking at the same moment of the same person, yet for all practical purposes they might as well have been in different counties.

Frank was not asleep—far from it; neither was he reading, though wrapped in a train of thought produced by a novel he had been perusing with unusual avidity and attention. His duties at the barracks had detained him all the previous evening, and catching the last train, not without difficulty, he succeeded in spending his Sunday in London, to find himself with nothing to do when he got there. Truth to tell, Frank was unsettled and unlike himself. He breakfasted without appetite at his cheerful little bachelor lodgings, which were always kept ready, even when the regiment was in London, and in which he slept perhaps half a dozen times in a month. He dressed in unseemly haste, he sallied

out tumultuously, with no definite object, and took refuge at last in the library of the Cauliflower, from sheer weariness of body and vacuity of mind. He was so unaccustomed to weigh matters seriously, as affecting the course of a whole lifetime, so unused to reflection on anything less obvious than the front of a squadron or the speed of a horse, that he felt really oppressed by the great argument going on in his own mind, as to whether he could, or could not, struggle through existence without asking Miss Hallaton to be his wife.

Young gentlemen of the present day are not an uxorious race, and Frank was like his fellows. He appreciated, nobody more, the liberty of a single man, and had imbibed from his elders, by precept, example, and warning, a certain dread of restraints and monotony that must accompany married life. But then, to sit opposite such a woman as Helen every morning at breakfast, to have her all to himself, without scheming for invitations, and watching for carriages; without necessity for being civil to a chaperon, or making up to a father, why it seemed a heaven upon earth, to attain which he would—yes, hang him if he wouldn't!—give up even the regiment itself.

Such being the frame of mind in which he sat down to read his novel, it was but natural that the progress of his studies should have confirmed any previous tendency to sentiment and domestic subjugation. This eloquent work, in three volumes, purporting to furnish a picture of real life, painted up a little, but not overdrawn, represented, of course, an impossible heroine, a combination of circumstances that never could have taken place, and a *jeune premier* beautiful as Endymion; nor, judging from his vagaries, apparently much less under the

influence of the moon. To use Frank's own expression, the scene that "fetched him," somewhere about the middle of the third volume, ran as follows:—

"A sunset of the tropics, or of paradise, crimson, orange, gold, the plumage of the flamingo, the tints of the dying dolphin, were all reflected in the deep pure eyes of that fair girl, as she leaned one snowy arm on the balustrade, and peered out over the lake, herself radiant as the sunset, loving as the flamingo, stern and resolved as the dolphin in his death-pangs. 'He cometh not,' she muttered, 'he cometh not!' and her fairy fingers, closing on the parapet, broke off a morsel of the stone-work with the grip and energy of a blacksmith. It fell with a splash in the lake. Could this be the expected signal? Was that important splash but the result of blind accident? Nay, was it not rather the summons of a relentless Fate? Ere the circles that it made in the limpid element had wholly disappeared, a boat was heard to grate upon the shingle beneath the castle. A cloaked figure stood in the prow, masked, booted, belted, and armed to the teeth. But when was true love yet deceived by belts, boots, masks, or pistols? 'Tis he!' she exclaimed, 'tis he!' and in another moment Lady Clara was in Roland's arms, sailing, sailing on towards the sunset, never to part on earth, never to part perhaps in"—

"Quite right too!" said Frank, closing the book with a bang. "Good fellow! plucky girl! I'll be hanged if I won't have a shy! She can but say 'No.' And if worst comes to worst, there's always the other to fall back upon!"

So, with this exceedingly disloyal and uncomplimentary adaptation of Miss Ross as a *pis-aller*, Frank sat himself down at the table lately occupied

by Goldthred, to concoct a letter in which, with as little circumlocution as possible, he should ask Miss Hallaton to be his wife.

Much mutual surprise was expressed by these two gentlemen, when, meeting an hour later in Pall Mall, they discovered that they had been fellow-travellers the night before, each in his own mind having envied the good fortune of the other in remaining at Windsor. With such a topic as their past picnic to discuss, and a certain indefinable instinct that they had some mysterious interests in common, they soon merged out of mere acquaintance into friendship, or that which the world calls friendship—an alliance for mutual support and convenience, originating in discreet regard for self. Further to cement this bond of brotherhood, they dined together solemnly at their club, and parted heartily tired of each other before eleven o'clock, going straight to bed, I verily believe, in sheer despair. And thus it was that these unfortunates, ardent lovers in their way, spent their Sunday in London.

CHAPTER XIV

POST-TIME

SUNDAY at the Lilies was far pleasanter to everybody concerned. Indeed, notwithstanding the proverbial dulness of the day that succeeds a festival, the female inmates of that charming little retreat were more inclined to be frolicsome than usual. Their hilarity might partly be accounted for by that principle of contradiction which prompts us all to merriment on such occasions as demand unusual sobriety of demeanour. You will observe children invariably predisposed to a romp on Sunday morning. I think also that each lady had reason to be satisfied in reviewing her afternoon's work of the day before. Mrs. Lascelles, if she did not succeed in adding one single brick to the superstructure of her castle in the air, believed she had, at least, consolidated its foundations, and that Sir Henry became day by day more malleable, though she felt constrained to admit the process of softening was exceedingly gradual, and perceptible only to herself. Miss Ross had sundry topics for reflection, all tending to self-gratulation. With Uncle Joseph, whom we may call her bird-in-the-hand, she had effected a thorough reconciliation. She could perceive, by the unusual splendour of his Sunday plumage, that he was more than ever enchanted with his

captivity, and meditated, at no distant period, some decided effort to render it irrevocable. She felt confidence enough in her own tact to be sure she could postpone such a catastrophe till it suited her convenience to bring it about, and this delay, she decided, should depend entirely on her progress in bagging her bird-in-the-bush. That Frank Vanguard was hit severely, and under the wing, she did not doubt, nor, though visited by painful misgivings, while she dwelt on the value of her prey, was she without strong hopes that by watching a timely opportunity, and making a brilliant snap-shot, she might prove too quick for her rival, and pull him down like a rocketer over Miss Hallaton's head. This was a pleasant dream for the future. She had, besides, a keen enjoyment to look forward to in the immediate present. She was about to see her boy — that alone would be happiness enough for a week! Nothing could be easier than to steal away, as if for afternoon church, and speed to Mrs. Mole's. From that garrulous old woman, too, she hoped to learn something definite about Achille. Why he was in England? what were his relations with the child? whether— and her heart bounded at the thought — it might not be possible, through the agency of this humble old peasant-woman, to obtain uncontrolled possession of her treasure? For such an object she felt she would willingly forego the patronage of Mrs. Lascelles, the vassalage of Uncle Joseph, home, position, prospects! Even Frank Vanguard himself? On the last point she could not quite make up her mind, so left it for future consideration.

With all these interests and occupations, Jin had yet found time to knit a tiny pair of socks for her Gustave. Tears filled her eyes while she

pictured the delight of fitting them to his chubby little feet that very afternoon as he sat on her knee. Though she had many faults she was yet a mother, and in mothers, even the most depraved, a well-spring of natural affection is to be found as surely as milk in a cow.

Helen, too, returning radiant from morning church, looked, to use Sir Henry's expression, "seven pound better" than the day before. Something seemed to have infused fresh vitality into the girl's existence; but of Helen's sentiments I cannot take upon me to furnish an analysis. In the pure unsullied heart of a young and loving woman there are depths it is desecration to fathom, feelings it is impossible to describe, and it would be sacrilege to caricature. None are so thoroughly aware of this as those who know what the bad can be in that sex, of which the good are so excellent. Well for him whose experience has lain amongst these last, and who goes to his grave with trust unshaken in the most elevating of earthly creeds — a belief in woman's love and woman's truth — whose worship of her outward beauty is founded on implicit confidence in the purity and fidelity of her heart! Such privileged spirits walk lightly over the troubles of their journey through life, as if they were indeed borne up by angels, "lest at any time they dash their foot against a stone."

Sunday luncheon, then, at the Lilies was a pleasant and sociable meal enough. Mrs. Lascelles, though surprised to find she did miss Goldthred a little, seemed in exuberant spirits, perhaps for that very reason. The rest took their tone from her whom they considered their hostess, and the repast, which differed only from dinner in the

absence of soup and fish, being excellent and elaborate, no wonder everybody was in high good-humour, and more disposed to talk than to listen.

The conversation at first turned upon yesterday's doings, and it is not to be supposed that the dress, manners, looks, character, and presumptive age of every other woman at the picnic escaped comment, criticism, or final condemnation. Sir Henry, indeed, true to his traditions, made a gallant stand in favour of one lady, the youngest of the party, "a miss in her teens," as she was contemptuously designated by his listeners, but found himself coughed down with great severity and contempt. He couldn't mean that odious girl in green ribbons! She was forward—she was noisy—she had freckles—she romped with Captain Roe—she flirted with Mr. Driver—she was ugly, unlady-like, bad style. Even Helen wondered quietly, "What papa could see in her? Though, to be sure, he always admired red hair!"

Their friends thus summarily disposed of, with the first course, they began talking about what they called their plans. It seemed there was to be an unavoidable break-up on the morrow, mitigated, however, by faithful promises from the absentees to return before the end of the week.

"I won't ask you to stay here and lose your ball to-morrow night," said Uncle Joseph, filling Helen's glass, with a kindly, half-protective air, affected by an elderly gentleman towards a young lady when he is not fool enough to be in love with her. "I know what these things are at your time of life, my dear. I used to like them myself, and danced, too, I can tell you! We danced much harder in my day. But why shouldn't you come back on Tuesday or Wednesday? See now, I'll

arrange it all. You're obliged to go to London to-morrow, you said, Rose, didn't you?"

"No help for it!" Mrs. Lascelles admitted. "I shall take my maid, sleep at No. 40, and come down again next day."

"Then why shouldn't you take care of Miss Hallaton, and bring her back with you?"

"Delightful!" assented his kinswoman. "And she can sleep at my house. It's the next street to Lady Shuttlecock's, and Helen's chaperon can drop her there after the ball. Sir Henry, will you trust her with me?"

Helen looked from Mrs. Lascelles to her father; the latter gave a joyful affirmative.

"It will save me a fifty-miles journey," said he. "Helen goes to the ball with her aunt, and if you bring her down again I needn't travel all the way to London to fetch her."

"But are you quite sure I shall not be troublesome?" asked Helen meekly, willing enough, however, to accept any arrangement that should facilitate her attendance at a ball she seemed very loath to miss.

"Troublesome, my dear!" repeated Mrs. Lascelles. "You don't know what a pleasure it is to have you! I quite look forward to showing you my pretty little house; and you shall sleep in Jin's room—unless you're coming too?" she added, turning to Miss Ross.

The latter, glancing at Uncle Joseph, who tried hard to look unconcerned, declined, with a bright smile. "She had nothing to tempt her in London," she said, "unless she could be of use to Rose. She would much rather stay in the pleasant country, and —and take care of Mr. Groves!"

Uncle Joseph coloured with delight, and Jin felt

that the cards were all playing themselves into her hand. It was even possible that Frank Vanguard might call to-morrow or the next day, whilst Helen was in London. She was sure of one, if not two, interviews with her child. Lastly, she would have a golden opportunity of showing Uncle Joseph how pleasant she could make his house while entertaining himself and his friends.

"You'll come back to dinner now, Hallaton," said the host, "as you are not due in town? I've asked one or two neighbours and their wives. What's more to the purpose, there's a haunch of venison."

Even that gastronomic temptation, however, was insufficient to affix certainty to any of Sir Henry's movements. "He was going to see some yearlings sold," he said—"the trains were all at variance. He should hope to get back the same day, but hadn't an idea whether he could. Helen, who understood Bradshaw, said not. All he knew was, he had to meet Mr. Weights, the trainer, at Ascot to-morrow at ten. He should be obliged to get up in the middle of the night!"

"*Must* you go so early?" asked Mrs. Lascelles, with a sympathising smile.

"No help for it," answered Sir Henry resignedly. "Shall have to breakfast at nine. Such is life!"

So Mrs. Lascelles managed to rise early the following morning, and come down to pour out Sir Henry's coffee, looking exceedingly fresh and handsome the while; but it is probable she might have saved herself the trouble, and enjoyed at least two hours more beauty-sleep, had she foreseen that Helen would also be in the breakfast-room to keep papa company, as was her custom during his morning meal.

So Sir Henry, after an exceedingly hasty repast, started off, with a cigar in his mouth, of course, for the congenial society of a trainer, and the delightful occupation of looking at untried thoroughbred stock that he could not afford to buy, leaving the ladies to such devices of their own as might while away their morning till the welcome hour of post-time.

"Letters! letters!" exclaimed Jin, who always took upon herself to superintend its arrival, departure, and, indeed, all arrangements connected with the correspondence at the Lilies; "two for Helen, one for Rose, one for me, and five for Mr. Groves,"—while she dealt from a packet in her hand these several missives to their respective owners, each of whom received the boon with gratitude, except Uncle Joseph.

Women, I believe, always like to get letters. To their craving dispositions, I imagine bad news is better than none; and they prefer the excitement of sorrow to the stagnation of no excitement at all. Even towards Christmas, when the majority of written communications tend to disturb our enjoyment of the season, only from male lips is heard the fervent thanksgiving, "No letters? What a blessing!" The ladies, I am persuaded, would rather receive reminders from their dressmakers than feel themselves cut off from all interest in the daily mail. Uncle Joseph, who expected but little gratification from his epistles, and under the most favourable conditions reflected they would mostly require answers, retired with a growl to peruse them in his own den. Where we may leave him to their full enjoyment, preferring to remain in the bright and cheerful morning-room with the ladies.

Miss Ross read her letter with a smile of con-

siderable amusement, and a mischievous glance at Mrs. Lascelles.

"From Goldie," said she, "and tolerably coherent, considering the poor thing's state of mind. Do you hear, Rose? I have actually got a letter from *your* Mr. Goldthred!"

"So have I," said Mrs. Lascelles quietly.

"So have I," echoed Helen; "I had no idea he wrote so nice a hand."

Comparing their several communications, the three ladies discovered that this painstaking correspondent had written in precisely the same terms to each, requesting, with no little formality, the pleasure of their company at his proposed picnic. To so polite a circular all admitted it was a thousand pities a refusal must be sent; but, alas! Goldthred had selected for his party a day fixed for one of those breakfasts in the vicinity of London at which everybody asked thinks it necessary to appear, while the uninvited decline other engagements, partly in hopes of a card at the last moment, partly that they may not publish their exclusion from this suburban paradise to their friends.

It cost Helen some minutes' study to frame her refusal of Mr. Goldthred's invitation.

She was little in the habit of writing to gentlemen, and entertained grave doubts as to the manner in which a young lady ought to address her correspondents of the other sex. To begin "Sir" she considered decidedly too formal. "Dear Mr. Goldthred" would be too familiar. After spoiling two sheets of notepaper, she resolved that "Dear Sir" was the correct thing, and sat down to write her note accordingly, with a beating heart and an exceedingly good pen.

It was not Mr. Goldthred's invitation, however,

that caused this derangement of Helen's circulation, that brought the light to her eyes, the colour to her cheeks. She had received Frank Vanguard's letter by the same post, and reading it, as she was forced to do, in the presence of the others, could scarce keep down a little cry of rapture and surprise at its contents. She walked away, indeed, to the window, so as to hide her face from her companions, and took the earliest opportunity of escaping to her own room, that she might devour it over and over again in solitude, but was presently drawn from that refuge by certain energetic housemaids, and compelled to return to the drawing-room without delay, inasmuch as the post left the Lilies again before luncheon. Such a letter as Frank's required an immediate answer, however short it might be, and Helen's was indeed of the shortest. She felt that until she had consulted her father, it was better not to pour out on paper the feelings thrilling at her heart. A very few words would serve to convey her sentiments in the meantime, so a couple of lines were considered enough to let Frank know that, as far as the young lady herself was concerned, his proposals should be favourably entertained.

It was very provoking, to be sure, that papa was out of the way, and that his absence was of such doubtful duration; still he would surely approve when he learned all particulars; and a day or two did not seem long to wait after weeks of uncertainty and anxiety. All at once Helen felt as if she had known Captain Vanguard her whole life, and never cared a straw for any other creature on earth. Her heart leaped to think there was a chance of meeting him to-night at Lady Shuttlecock's. He would be sure to guess she was going. Of course he would be there!

So, with a quickened pulse, as I have said, and affecting much outward composure, Miss Hallaton daintily folded two neat little packets, and addressed them, notwithstanding her agitation, in a perfectly steady handwriting, to William Goldthred, Esq., and Captain F. Vanguard, respectively, each at the Cauliflower Club, St. James's, S.W. Then she dropped them into a letter-box that stood under the clock in the front hall, and felt so happy she could have sung aloud for joy.

But a pair of lynx-eyes had been watching Helen's movements; a keen and busy brain was working eagerly to account for every change in the girl's demeanour, from the first flush of pleasure with which she read her letters to the buoyant step and joyous air with which she re-entered the drawing-room after depositing their answers in the box. Miss Ross knew well enough that a communication from Goldthred was insufficient to produce this unusual agitation, and a keen instinct of jealousy whispered that Helen's other letter must be from Frank Vanguard.

Jin's pale face turned paler at the thought, but it was her nature to confront a difficulty as soon as suspected! to overcome it unscrupulously and without regard to the means employed, if it really stood in her way.

She would have given a great deal to see the letter Helen read over half a dozen times under her very eyes, but how was that possible when it lay safely stowed away in the breast of a morning gown? No; the letter was doubtless out of reach, but she could get some information surely from its answer!

A walk before luncheon had been agreed on, at the instigation indeed of Miss Ross, who wanted

her afternoon clear for a visit to Mrs. Mole. She was ready before the others ; and while they were putting their bonnets on, ran downstairs with a jug of warm water, to the astonishment of the housemaid, who heard her say she was going to water some plants in the library. Then she fidgeted backwards and forwards from the hall to the drawing-room, and Mrs. Lascelles, coming out of the latter apartment, found her bending over the letter-box.

"What are you about, Jin?" said her friend. "Helen and I have been looking for you in the conservatory."

"Only posting my answer to Goldie," replied Miss Ross, with a laugh. "Don't be jealous, Rose. He'll show it to you, I'm sure, if you ask him."

But she seemed absent and preoccupied during their walk, though more cordial and affectionate in her manner to Helen than she had ever been before.

CHAPTER XV

BETWEEN CUP AND LIP

NEVER in her life, perhaps, had Helen enjoyed anything so much as her afternoon's journey to London with Mrs. Lascelles. The smiling landscape on either side the railroad looked fairer, brighter, more like *home* than ever, when seen under a glow of celestial light radiating from a happy heart. For her, that seemed a glory, shining direct from paradise, which was to her companion but a glare of heat and discomfort, dazzling, scorching—worse, unbecoming in the extreme.

"It's good for the country, my dear, that's a comfort; but I'm sure it's fatal to one's complexion," said Mrs. Lascelles, vainly endeavouring to combine the shelter of a blind with the draught from an open window at forty miles an hour. "If they're to make hay when the sun shines, now's their time. How provoking! We shall have him in here. I *told* the guard we wanted this carriage to ourselves. Dear Helen, can't you look as if you'd got the mumps?"

But dear Helen was possibly not desirous of assuming so disfiguring a malady, for the unwelcome passenger put his head into their compartment, and, being a man of the world, sued *in formâ pauperis* for an accommodation to which he was entitled by the purchase of his first-class ticket.

He did *not* say, "I have as good a right here as you, having paid my fare"; but, lifting his hat, stepped quietly in with a smiling apology for disturbing them. "The train is so full," said he, "I cannot find room even second class. I hope I shall not be much in your way."

We all know how readily the sex are disarmed by cool audacity veiled under a respectful manner. The "odious creature" became "a pleasant gentleman-like man" on the spot, and Picard—for it was none other—so ingratiated himself with the ladies that, when he left them at Paddington, they burst forth simultaneously in praise of his appearance, his manners, his whiskers, his white hat, everything that was his.

"Must be a foreigner," declared Helen. "He's so well-bred!"

This, I have observed, is a favourite feminine fallacy, not to be exploded but by much Continental travel in mixed society.

"Must be *somebody*!" chimed in Mrs. Lascelles. "I am sure I know his face. I think he drives a drag. I declare, Helen, I'll bow to him if I meet him anywhere about."

"So will I," said Helen; and forgot his existence forthwith.

Was she not even now in the same town with Frank Vanguard — treading the same pavement, breathing the same air (and smoke)?

"We'll have one turn for health in the Park," said Mrs. Lascelles, as the two ladies seated themselves in her open carriage. "You know you're in my charge to-day, Helen; and I mean to bring you out in what your papa calls the 'best possible form.' To-night, dear, I'm determined you shall win all your engagements!"

So her stout and florid coachman, shaving the kerbstone to an inch, turned under the Marble Arch at a liberal twelve miles an hour, which subsided into three before he reached Grosvenor Gate, and so, losing his identity in a double column of carriages, brilliant and glittering as his own, commenced the performance of that imposing function, grand, deliberate, and funereal, which is solemnised every lawful day in Hyde Park between six and half-past seven p.m. Barouches, sociables, tax-carts, Victorias, every kind of wheeled conveyance, were wedged three-deep in the road. All the chairs on the footway were occupied, and the path was blocked with walkers to the rails. Mounted policemen, making themselves ubiquitous, pranced about and gesticulated with unusual vehemence. Those on foot ferried passengers across the drive at intervals, majestically rebuking for that purpose the horse and his rider, the charioteer, and the foaming, highly-bitted animal he controlled.

It was once said of London by a visitor, I believe from Dublin, that "you could not see the town for the houses." Here, in this high tide of humanity, you could not see the people for the crowd.

"Not a soul in the Park!" observed Mrs. Lascelles, languidly scanning the myriads that surrounded her.

"I can't think where they get to," said Helen. "Nobody ever seems to come here that one knows."

But a vivid blush rose to her temples whilst she spoke. So becoming was its effect, that a young man, leaning against the rails, extricating his intellect for a moment out of vacancy, exclaimed to his companion—

"*Caramba!* Jack!"—he had once been at

Gibraltar for a week, and piqued himself on swearing in Spanish—"*Caramba!* Jack! what a good-looking girl! Who is she?"

And Jack, never at a loss, detailed her private history forthwith, identifying her as the daughter of a foreign minister, and furnishing his friend with a jaw-breaking German name, impracticable to pronounce, even had it been possible to remember. But the origin of this young lady's confusion occupied a position far beyond these pedestrian admirers, and was, indeed, none other than Frank Vanguard, taking the air on a very desirable hack amongst several equestrians of the season, but so partitioned off from Helen by dandies, dowagers, peers, commoners, and servants in livery, to say nothing of an iron railing, that, for all gratification to be obtained from his society, he might as well have been the other side of the Serpentine.

He saw her, though, that was some comfort. So did Mrs. Lascelles, confirming thereby into certainty the suspicions she entertained that Helen cherished a real affection for this captivating dragoon.

"She's a dear girl," thought that quick-sighted lady; "and Jin shall not interfere with her. He's tolerably well off. They might both do worse; and Sir Henry would like it. Home, John!"

So, although Frank sent his hack along as fast as our police regulations permit, in order to catch a glimpse of his charmer while she left the Park at Albert Gate, he was rewarded only with a back view of Mrs. Lascelles's carriage, ornamented by a boy and basket taking a free passage to their next destination.

"Never mind," thought the rider. "I can't miss seeing her to-night at Battledore House.

We'll put it all right in the tearoom. I *think* she'll say 'Yes.' Why shouldn't she? My darling, I'll make you as happy as ever I can."

I wonder if the hack thought his master's caress at this moment was bestowed entirely for his own sake. He shook his dainty head as if he did, rolling his shoulders, and rising into one or two managed gambols, as he bore Frank homewards at a canter.

To meet one's lady-love at an exceedingly smart ball with the desperate intention of proposing to her then and there, ought to be excitement enough, in all conscience, for any one day; but, during the London season, people cram a week's work into twenty-four hours, and Frank had yet a good deal to do before he could find himself in that tearoom at Battledore House, to which he looked forward so longingly, and with the recesses of which his previous experience, I fear, had rendered him unjustifiably familiar.

A protracted mess-dinner to meet an illustrious personage must first be gone through. It would be impossible to leave the barracks till that personage gave the signal for breaking up; and although a London ball is the latest of all festive gatherings, Frank, I think, was the only individual present, at an early hour of the morning, who felt anything but regret when the guest, who had thus honoured them, taking a kind and cordial farewell of his entertainers, announced himself ready to depart.

"If I can get there by two," thought the young officer, "I may catch her before she leaves. It's just my luck to have tumbled into this d—d thing, when I wanted to be elsewhere!"

Thus, you see, does one man undervalue privileges which another perhaps esteems the height of human felicity. Of all Thackeray's keen

touches, there are none keener than that in which Lord Steyne says, "Everybody wants what they haven't got. 'Gad, I dined with the King yesterday, and we'd boiled mutton and turnips!"

"We're late, Frank," said young Lord Kilgarron. "Jump into my brougham. It will get us there quicker than a cab. Battledore House, Tom. Drive like blazes!" The last to a smart lad in livery, who obeyed this injunction to the letter, as Lord Kilgarron leaped lightly in after his friend, and banged to the door.

"I *must* go," added his lordship. "She's my aunt, you know. What's the use of an aunt, Frank? I get very little good out of mine. Now a grandmother's a decent kind of relationship. Mine gave me the very mare we're driving — half-sister to Termagant. She's a rum 'un, I can tell you!"

"A fast one, I see," remarked Frank, with much composure, considering they were now whirling past the lamps at a gallop.

"Is it fast?" demanded his companion exultingly. "Wouldn't she have won the Garrison Cup at the Curragh last year, as sure as ever she was saddled, only the fools ran the race at a walk, and never began at all till the finish!"

Lord Kilgarron was a thorough Irishman, devoted to sport, reckless of danger, and possessing the knack, indigenous to his countrymen, of hitting off graphic description by a happy blunder.

"She can go," he added, "and she can stay. That mare, sir, would gallop for a week. Faith, an' she's running off now!"

She was indeed! The Termagant blood, roused by contradiction and an injudicious pull at that side of her mouth which had not been rendered callous in training, rose to boiling pitch. Irritation, resentment,

and fear of subsequent punishment, combined to madden her. A frantic rise at her collar, a plunge, a lift of her shapely quarters, that only the strongest of kicking-straps prevented from dissevering the whole connection, and the mare was fairly out of her driver's hands, and swinging down Piccadilly with a brougham and two dandies behind her almost as fast as she ever swept across the Curragh of Kildare.

"This is too good to last long," observed Frank, as, shaving a lamp-post, they slued across the street, almost into the panels of a stationary cab, causing its driver to swear hideously in the vulgar tongue. "But it is the only chance of being in time!"

"We'll pull through, well enough, bar lepping!" answered the other, a touch of the brogue rising under excitement with mellow fluency to his lips. "Ye done it now, by the vestment!" he added, while half-sister to Termagant, cannoning from the broad wheel of an early vegetable waggon, against which she cut her shoulder to the bone, lost her foothold, and fell with a crash on the slippery pavement, bursting every strap and buckle of her harness, smashing into fragments lamps, shafts, and splash-board, to bring the whole carriage, with its contents, atop of her in headlong confusion. "Hurt, Kil?" demanded Frank, rising from the footway, on which he had gone a shooter through the swinging door, over the entire person of his friend.

"Landed on my head!" answered Kilgarron, as esteeming the fact a sufficient assurance of safety. "Where's Tom?"

"Here, my lord," replied that invincible functionary, with a cut on his pate that, to use his master's expression, would have "bothered an Irishman." "I've got your lordship a cab." Tom having indeed

hailed one of these peripatetic vehicles while in the act of regaining his feet to secure the mare from destructive struggles by kneeling on her head.

In such a thoroughfare as Piccadilly, assistance is to be found even at two in the morning. Ere long the mare was again on her legs, at least on three of them. The brougham was being towed, like a dismasted wreck, into port; and the two passengers, having obtained clean water and the use of a clothes-brush in the chemist's shop, alighted from their cab at the door of Battledore House, "not a ha'porth the worse," as Kilgarron said, "an' fit to take the floor with the best of them!"

This young nobleman was proud of his dancing, pluming himself especially on a strict attention to time which he called "humouring the tune."

But these untoward incidents befalling guests who were too late at anyrate, brought their arrival to a period when most others were departing, and the ball seemed nearly over. Passing hastily through the crowd that always cluster about an awning, and hurrying up the cloth-covered steps with unseemly precipitancy, Frank became aware of his ill-luck when he heard the fatal announcement, "Lady Sycamore's carriage stops the way! Lady Sycamore coming out!"

Lady Sycamore was Helen's aunt and occasional chaperon. The Miss Planes, her ladyship's daughters, without pretension to beauty, were large, healthy, fresh-looking girls, of the dairymaid style. Their mamma, wisely resolving that whatever charms they did possess should be deteriorated as little as possible by bad air and want of sleep, invariably withdrew her charges from ball, drum, or concert at the earliest hour she could gather them under her wing.

Frank, entering the cloakroom to leave his paletot, found himself face to face with Helen coming into the hall.

For the first hour or two that night, Miss Hallaton had reaped a very fair harvest of admiration. Those who arrived later, and to whom she was pointed out as a beauty of the season, opined she was too pale, wanted freshness, brightness, and wore a very saddened expression for so young a girl. Lord Jericho, who danced his first quadrille with her, thought Miss Hallaton, without exception, the pleasantest company he ever came across, and held forth next day at luncheon in praise of her beauty, wit, manners, originality, and good-nature, till his sisters, the Ladies Ruth and Rebecca Jordan, hated the very sound of her name. Whereas, Vere Vacuous (of the Foreign Office, with an inordinate opinion of the last-named individual), who took her to tea, considered Miss Hallaton "classical, perhaps — statuesque rather. All very well as long as she don't open her mouth; but dull, he should say; probably quite uneducated. Provincial; yes, that described her, he thought. Great want of animation, and much too pale!"

This last accusation he must have retracted could he have seen the blush that reddened Helen's cheek, when, coming suddenly out of the cloakroom on the person she had been expecting the whole evening, she almost butted her head into the tie of his neck-cloth ere she could start back and take him calmly by the hand.

Frank never saw it. How should he? Neither of these young people quite understood all that was going on in the other's heart; and yet both were prepared to take the fatal plunge, and pass the rest of their lives together in the same element. Captain

Vanguard, wonderful to relate, felt almost shy, and found himself strangely unobservant of everything but a beating in his temples, and a queer sensation about his diaphragm. Of course he would have denied it, but his own colour rose higher than usual, while Lady Sycamore, a portly person with vast scope for the laces, jewels, and other ornaments which decorated her before and behind, accosted him with exceeding graciousness, wondering volubly why he came so late? Then he had to exchange friendly greetings with the Miss Planes, each of whom considered him an eligible partner for a waltz, a cotillon, or a lifetime. At the last moment, too, Goldthred, who had a happy knack of committing ill-timed civilities, and such little social blunders, coming downstairs unoccupied, pounced on Miss Hallaton to put her into the carriage, thinking, no doubt, he was fulfilling his duty to everybody's satisfaction, and Frank was forced to offer his arm to Lady Sycamore.

It was too provoking! Poor Helen could have cried; but, goaded to desperation, the moment Goldthred released her by the carriage-door, she contrived to drop her fan with so much energy, that it fell clattering on the steps at Frank Vanguard's feet.

He accepted the opportunity readily enough, and while he put it into her hand, their heads came very near together, under the inspection only of an approving linkman — more than half drunk.

"Did you get my note?" she whispered quick as lightning.

"No."

"It's waiting for you. Thanks! Captain Vanguard. Good-night," and disappearing in the gloomy vaults of the family coach, she rolled off

through the darkness, leaving him standing on the steps at Battledore House,

"With a ghost-seer's look when the ghost disappears."

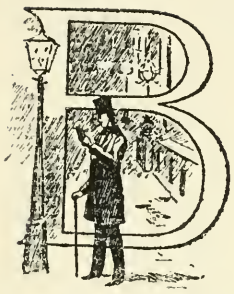
"I hope your honour's enjoyed your ball," said the linkman.

Frank started. He had never been upstairs, nor even made his bow to Lady Shuttlecock. What had he to do with the ball?

Nevertheless, he put his hand in his pocket and gave the linkman half a crown.

CHAPTER XVI

A FACER



UT Frank entertained no thoughts of returning to the scene of gaiety he had quitted on its very threshold. Stopping only to put a cigar in his mouth, he turned, without a pang, from these "halls of dazzling light," to walk slowly away through a succession of dark streets, like a man in a dream.

"It's waiting for you!" Of course it was; and what a fool had he been not to inquire for his letters at the Cauliflower ere he dressed for dinner. She must have answered his proposal very quickly, he thought; couldn't have taken time to consult papa, nor anyone else; must have made up her mind in a moment—women always did. Was this a good omen or not? At each alternate lamp-post he changed his opinion. Here, he argued she had jumped at the offer the instant it was made, loving him so dearly, and being so determined to marry him that it was needless to consult anyone else on the subject; ten paces farther on, he saw the other side of the question. If she meant to refuse him, it couldn't be done too quickly, and the less said about it the better. Such an answer would,

of course, be sent by return of post; and, preoccupied as he was, he found himself vaguely calculating the many deliveries of that valuable institution, speculating whether he could indeed have received her letter at his club had he called for it so early as half-past seven o'clock.

Revolving this irrelevant consideration in his mind, Helen's beauty and confusion, as he saw her ten minutes ago, rose like a vision before his eyes, and he felt all joy and confidence once more. "Sure of winning!" he said out loud, with a puff of smoke into the hot, close night. "Cock-sure, my boy, as if you'd got the race in your pocket!"

In two more streets he would reach the Cauliflower, and his heart leaped wildly to think of the dainty white missive, with its delicate superscription, even now awaiting him in the lobby of that caravanserai.

Quickening his pace, the sooner to end suspense, he came in sight of a figure lurching along the pavement some fifty yards ahead, with the gait of a man who, not in the least overcome by wine, is yet enough under its influence to walk more leisurely and with a more pretentious swing than usual.

He saw them by dozens every night of his life, and would have taken little notice of this convivial bird returning to roost, but that his attention was aroused by the scrutinising manner in which two men, by whom he was himself overtaken at a quick walk, looked under the brim of his hat as they passed by. Returning their stare, he observed they were an ill-favoured couple enough, and that one shook his head as if dissatisfied, crossing the street forthwith to join a third figure that stole out of the shade cast by the opposite houses. Whatever might be their object, all three seemed now to join eagerly

in the chase. Frank slackened sail to observe their movements, and was soon satisfied they were dogging the steps of the passenger ahead, who walked carelessly on in happy unconsciousness that he was watched or pursued.

These four, tracked and trackers, were pretty close together as they turned out of the main thoroughfare into a street which several yards of high dead wall without lamps rendered one of the darkest in the West End of London. Frank looked up and down for a policeman in vain. Not a soul was to be seen, and finding himself the only occupant of the pavement, he ran stealthily forward to the corner round which the others had lately disappeared, much mistrusting his assistance would be wanted without delay.

He was right. Already he could hear a scuffling of feet, a smothered oath, two or three blows exchanged, in short, sharp cracks like pistol-shots, while a hoarse voice muttered—

"Slip it into him, George! Would ye now? Take that—and that!"

Notwithstanding their numbers, however, the ruffians seemed to have a hard bargain of their prey. The latter, with his back to the dead wall, fought like a wild cat, but three to one make short work, and in a couple of minutes he was overpowered, and down on his knee. Had his head touched the pavement, it might never have risen again, but at this critical juncture in leaped Frank Vanguard, like an Apollo who had learned to box. One remarkably straight left-hander doubled up the smallest assailant like the kick of a horse, while another sent the next in size staggering into the middle of the road, where he thought well to remain for a space, grasping his jaw with both

hands, and blaspheming hideously. The biggest villain, shouting "Bobbies!" with an execration, and expressing his intention to "hook it," took to his scrapers, as he called them, at once, and was speedily followed by his equally cowardly auxiliaries.

Frank looked wistfully after the assailants, while he lifted their victim to his feet, exclaiming, with the utmost surprise, "Why, it's Picard!" as the dim light enabled him to identify that gentleman, considerably mauled and dishevelled, yet apparently not very seriously hurt.

Bleeding and breathless, Picard's presence of mind seemed, however, not to have deserted him. Before thanking Vanguard he felt for a parcel of notes in his breast-pocket, and laughed as heartily as aching bones and heaving lungs would permit.

"They have missed the swag," said he, wiping his bloody face with a cambric handkerchief, "and it's worth collaring, I can tell you. It's always my maxim to stick by the stuff; but if it hadn't been for you, 'squire, I must have caved out this spell, I estimate. It would have been a pity, too," he added, relapsing into the English language as he cooled down, "for, bar one at Baltimore, two years back, it's the best night I ever had in my life. 'Pon my soul, Vanguard, I'm heartily obliged to you; and how you hit out! Why, that dirty, black-muzzled chap spun round as if he was shot."

"He's hurt my knuckles, the little beast!" said Frank, looking with much commiseration at certain abrasions on a white and bony hand. "But what have you been about, my dear fellow! and how did they know you'd got money? Were you at all screwed?"

"Sober as a judge!" answered Picard. "In fact, a deal soberer than some judges I've seen down

West in my time. I've been playing billiards ever since eleven o'clock, making game after game off the balls in a form you'd hardly believe. The fact is, I caught a flat, who thought he was sharp! First he lost his money, then his temper. Of course he played on to get back both. I didn't win so very easy, you know; indeed I had rather a squeak for it more than once; but I always managed to nail him in the last break. Then we got to double or quits, and I needn't tell you how *that* went. He'd a friend too, from the country, what you Britishers call a yokel, I suspect, who backed his man handsome and paid up like the Bank of England. I drew this sportsman to a lively tune, I can tell you. Altogether I landed a hatful, and not a drop would I have to drink till just before starting. I don't *think* they hocussed me; no, I've been hocussed before, and I know what it is. But their brandy was infernally strong, or the soda-water unaccountably weak, for somehow I felt so jolly I said I wouldn't have a cab, but walk home behind a weed.

"Now I think of it, there was a big, awkward-looking skunk loafing about the table most of the night, who never betted nor played, but seemed always on the watch, to see we didn't steal the chalk, as I supposed. I know better now. He sneaked out, I remarked, when I went for a cocktail. No doubt he watched me start off to walk, and followed with his pals. That's the gentleman who skedaddled just now so freely when it came to a fight. Captain Vanguard, I say again, I'm infernally obliged to you!"

Frank, whose excitement had cooled down, was on thorns to receive his letter. "Have a cigar," said he, proffering his case. "I fear I can't do anything more for you now. I'll see you home, if

you like, but I'm rather anxious to get to my club before they shut up. It's the Cauliflower, you know. Almost in the next street."

"I live close by," exclaimed Picard. "We'll go together, and I hope you'll come and look me up at my rooms to-morrow. I've a few Yankee notions, and things I've got together knocking about Mexico and the States. They might amuse you, and I can give you a capital weed—nobody better; and you shall have the best I have, you shall. John Picard never yet forgot a good turn nor a bad one. You're the right sort, Captain, real grit; and you and me are mates for life. It's John Picard says so, and there's his hand upon it!"

Frank, who entertained a truly British horror of being thanked, would fain have escaped forthwith, but there was no avoiding the proffered hand; and it struck him also that his new friend reeled somewhat in his gait, talking the while more volubly and thicker than at first.

Resolving, therefore, to see him safely to his own door, and return as speedily as possible to the Cauliflower, he grappled his companion firmly by the arm, and steered him without difficulty along the now deserted pavement.

A couple of heavy blows on the head, with a strong squeeze of the throat, had served, no doubt, to intensify the effect of such villainous brandy as Picard imbibed before leaving the billiard-room in which he had been so successful. He said as much, admitting a certain influence on his physical powers, but repudiating, with suspicious jealousy, the idea that hard knocks or alcohol could in any way affect his brain.

"My boots are a little screwed," he observed, contemplating them with a gentle forbearance, "but

my legs are right enough, and so am I. John Picard isn't a man, sir, to be upset by a drop of corn-brandy, nor a hug from a loafer like that. I'd have whipped him into Devonshire cream if I'd had a clear stage. How many were there, now, according to your calculation? I tell ye fair, I was down (because these d—d boots chose to get drunk) before I'd time to count!"

"Only three," answered Frank, laughing, "and not a good man in the lot. They wouldn't have tried it on if we had been together; but your boots went so fast I couldn't catch them."

The other shook his head gravely. "Three," said he. "An' I hadn't even a toothpick."

"Toothpick!" repeated Frank in astonishment. "Lucky you hadn't—you'd have swallowed it!"

Picard being now arrived at that stage in which a man finds it impossible to make any statement, however trivial, without turning round and facing his companion, stopped short beneath a lamp-post, while he explained with great solemnity—

"A bowie-knife, about eighteen inches long, sharp on both sides, and weighted in the handle, is what *we* call a toothpick, young man, down Arkansas way. It's a neat tool — very — and balances beautiful. Some like them up the sleeve. I used to wear mine down the collar of my coat. That an' a six-shooter, if you're pretty spry, will clear the kitchen smart enough in a general row. Down to Colorado now, I'd have laid those three loafers in the larder before you could say 'bitters.' And to think that to-night I shouldn't have had so much as a pencil-case on me! How old Abe Affable would laugh if he came to hear of it! Poor old Abe! The last time I saw him he wanted to scalp a nigger for blacking his boots instead of greasing

them. Well, well; different countries, different manners, and different drinks, no doubt. I like this country, Captain. After all, I'm a citizen of the world, but more a Britisher than anything else."

"Are we near your house now?" asked Frank, whose impatience made him almost wish he had left this citizen of the world to his fate.

"Next lamp-post but two," replied the other, with an unmeaning laugh. "Boots know where they are now, I do believe—would find their own way to the scraper if I was to pull 'em off, I'll lay a hundred. Here you are, Captain, latchkey sober at anyrate. You won't come in? Well, perhaps it *is* late; good-night, mate. One word before you cast off."

Poor Frank, chafing like an irritable horse at the starting-post, returned on his track, and Picard took hold of the lappet of his coat.

"I'll go back to Windsor with you," said he cordially. "I like Windsor, and I like *you*. I've reason to like both. Look here, Vanguard; there's something at Windsor that would have looked very queer if I'd been rubbed out just now; and I might have been, I don't deny it, but for you. Poor little chap, he's got nobody in the world but me! Perhaps that's why I'm so fond of him. I daresay Pharaoh's daughter thought there never was such a child as Moses when she pulled him out of the water. I know when I fished *my* boy out he put his chubby arms round my neck as if I'd been his father. Little rogue! I couldn't care more for him if he was my own, twenty times over.

"I'm a domestic fellow naturally, Vanguard, though I'm yarning to you now, under a lamp-post, at three in the morning. I've had a rough time of it, one way and another. Not always fair play, I fancy. Sometimes I think I'm the biggest black-

guard unhung. Sometimes I hope I'm not so much worse than my neighbours."

Frank was thoroughly good-natured.

"We'll talk that over to-morrow," said he; "in the meantime good-night."

"Good-night," repeated the other. "I know what I say, Vanguard," he called out after his friend, while putting his latchkey in the lock; "and to prove it, I'll show you my boy!"

"He must be very drunk," thought Frank, speeding down the street like a deer, "and I'm glad I came across him in the nick of time—there would have been mischief if those fellows had got at him alone."

In another moment, palpitating and breathless, he was on the steps of the Cauliflower Club, where, passing swiftly into the hall, he espied Goldthred reading a letter by gaslight, with an expression of countenance that denoted he was profoundly mystified by its contents.

This gentleman, strolling in to quench his thirst after the glare, heat, worry, disappointment, and general penance of Lady Shuttlecock's ball, and running his eye as usual down the letter-rack, drew from the compartment "G" a laconic little epistle without signature, of which the second and third perusals bewildered him no less than the first—

"If you are really in earnest," so ran this mysterious document, "come to-morrow; there is somebody to be consulted besides me."

What could it mean? A lady's handwriting, to which he was an utter stranger. No name, no date, no monogram. "Come to-morrow," thought Goldthred. "Certainly! But where? And when *is* to-morrow? It's ten minutes past three now. Oh! this can't be intended for *me*!"

Then he turned it upside down, backwards and forwards, inside out. The envelope was addressed correctly enough, Christian and surname in full, with even a flourish of caligraphy adorning his humble title of Esquire. Many members of the Cauliflower would have pocketed the effusion without emotion, as a mere everyday conquest of some anonymous admirer, but such a suspicion never entered Goldthred's honest head. In his utter freedom from self-conceit, this note puzzled him exceedingly; but to have believed it due to his own powers of fascination, would, in his loyalty to Mrs. Lascelles, have annoyed him still more.

The same letter-rack, low down, under "V," produced another epistle in a similar handwriting, which Frank snatched with eagerness from its place and pressed hungrily to his lips, as he rushed back into the street, feeling a strange suffocating necessity on him to read it in the open air. Earning an epicurean prolongation of pleasure, which most of us indulge in, by deferring its actual commencement, he walked some few paces on his homeward way ere he tore open the envelope, with a blessing on his lips for the girl he loved, and something like tears of gratitude, affection, and happiness starting to his eyes.

These started back again, however, and clustered like icicles round his heart, while he read the following terse and explicit communication—

"DEAR SIR,—I regret that a previous engagement will prevent my availing myself of your polite offer. I shall, of course, inform my father of your proposal when he returns,—And remain, yours sincerely, HELEN HALLATON."

Frank clenched his fists and shut his teeth tight, for it *hurt* him. Hurt him very severely, though

he scorned to wince or cry out, only smiling in anything but mirth, while he said aloud to the gas-lamps—

"I didn't think she was such a bad one! Miss Ross is worth a dozen of her. Oh, Helen, how *could* you!"

Perhaps in all his life he never loved her better than now, while he swore nothing should induce him to see or speak to her again.

CHAPTER XVII

DISTRACTIONS

MRS. LASCELLES, like many of her sex, entertained a high opinion of her own medical skill in all ailments of mind or body. If your finger ached, she would produce an absurd little box, the size of a Geneva watch, from which, with an infinitesimal gold spoon, like a bodkin, she proceeded to give you a strong dose, consisting of two white atoms not so large as pins' heads, dissolved in a glass of pure water, which they neither flavoured nor coloured, nor otherwise affected in the least. Repeating this elfin discipline two or three times with the utmost gravity, she would have been exceedingly mortified, and almost offended, if you had not declared yourself better forthwith. And it is but fair to say that I never heard of anyone being worse for the prescriptions she dispensed with such confidence and liberality.

But if the pain was in your heart, this general practitioner buckled on her armour with yet greater alacrity, and confronted the enemy on a far more vigorous system of tactics. She refrained indeed, wisely enough, from prematurely assaulting his stronghold, but attacked his outworks one by one with unflinching determination, so that the citadel, deprived on all sides of its supports, wavered, collapsed, and surrendered at discretion.

One of the most powerful engines with which she battered, so to speak, the obstinate fortresses garrisoned by such tried veterans as Memory, Pique, and Disappointment, was a little gaiety, by which Mrs. Lascelles understood a round of London amusements and continual change of scene. "Sympathy, my dear," she would say, with a comical little sigh and shake of her dainty head, "sympathy from those who have felt sorrow, and going about,—to good places, of course,—with dancing, you know, and plenty of partners, will cure anything. *Anything!* I assure you, for I've tried it; except, perhaps, a broken neck!"

In pursuance, then, of this extremely plausible theory, it was not long after the events described in the last chapter, that Miss Hallaton found herself sitting next Mrs. Lascelles in a box at the opera, hoping, no doubt, for that distraction from sorrow which I fear is seldom found in music, mirth, or gaiety; but which is rarely sought in vain by the pillow of suffering, in the house of mourning, under any roof or in any situation where we can lend a willing hand at the great cable of brotherly love and unselfish effort, which alone hauls the ship's company into port at last.

It seems to me that sights and sounds of beauty serve but to add a cruel poison to the sting; whereas honest, unremitting toil provides us a certain opiate; and active charity towards others draws gradually the venom from our wound.

Helen had suffered acutely. The girl's pride was humbled to the dust, and even that infliction was not the worst. Her gods had deceived her, and her idols proved to be but clay. Frank Vanguard's conduct was more than fickle, more than heartless; it seemed actually brutal and un-

manly! Since her reply to the letter in which he asked her to become his wife, he had never been near her, had held no communication with her family nor herself, but had avoided them all with a persistence insulting as it was unaccountable.

Whatever reasons he might have, she felt his conduct was utterly inexcusable, and Helen endured that bitterest of all punishments, the conviction not only that her love was without return, but that she had bestowed it on an unworthy object; had misconceived the very nature, mistaken the very identity of him whom she once felt proud to know so thoroughly, whom she imagined no one thus knew but herself.

"I thought him so different!" In that simple sentence—said by how many, and how bitterly!—lurked all the sorrow, all the humiliation, all the despair. The man she loved had never really existed. She must teach herself to forget this dream, this delusion, as if it had never been. With woman's fortitude of endurance, woman's decency of courage, Helen fought her battle, hid her wounds, and swallowed her tears, but the struggle told on her severely. Sir Henry, cursing late hours and hot rooms, talked of taking his daughter back to the country. Even Jin's heart smote her when she marked the pale face, the drooping gestures, the sad, weary looks; while Mrs. Lascelles, insisting on her own treatment of a malady she was persuaded she alone could cure, took every opportunity of administering amusement in large doses, and esteemed no part of her regimen more efficacious than these long hours of heat, glare, noise, imprisonment, and musical stupefaction spent at the Italian opera.

So Helen, watching the business of the stage with eyes from which the tears would *not* keep

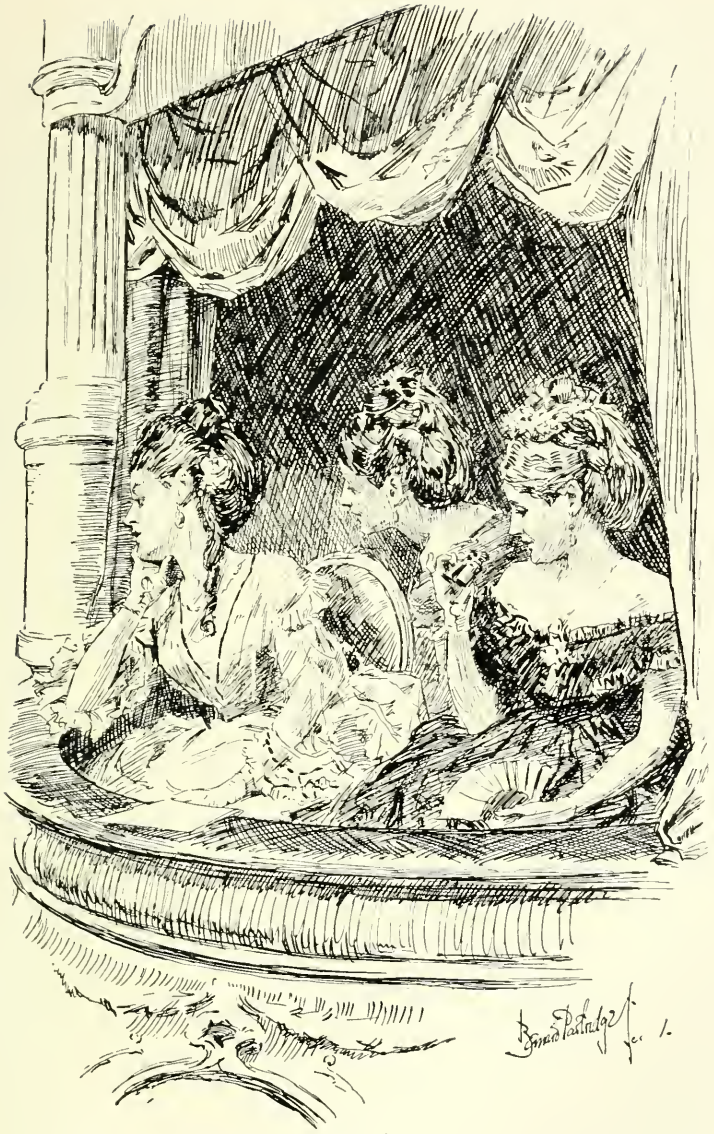
back, while those thrilling strains rose and fell in the outcry of remorseful passion, or the wail of hopeless, yet undying love, wondered vaguely why there should be all this sorrow upon earth, springing, apparently, from the purest and most elevated instincts of the human heart. She forgot that a time would come hereafter, perhaps on this side the grave, when the misery that was eating into her own young life must seem no less unreasonable, no less unreal, than that of the harmonious lady yonder, in pearls and white satin, who would take her place at supper in an hour, with spirits and appetite unimpaired by the breaking heart that, flying mellifluously to her lips in this intricate *cavatina*, brought down on her a rainbow shower of bouquets, followed by a thunderstorm of applause. "That *is* singing!" said Miss Ross, from the back of the box, drawing a long breath of intense enjoyment, the enjoyment of the artist who appreciates as well as admires. "Rose, why didn't I bring a bouquet? I'd throw my head at her if it would take off!"

Mrs. Lascelles laughed, and made a sign signifying "Hush!" while Miss Ross whispered over Helen's shoulder—"Isn't it *too* delightful, dear? In my opinion music's the only thing worth living for!"

Helen, who esteemed nothing much worth living for at that moment, responded with modified enthusiasm, and turned languidly to the stage. Just then the box-door opened; and she knew, though he was behind her, and had not spoken a syllable, that it admitted Frank Vanguard!

He couldn't keep away! Of course he would not have allowed that any part of this crowded house held for him the slightest attraction.

Fidgeting in the stalls, and getting Helen's



"Isn't it too delightful, dear?"

well-remembered profile within range of his opera-glasses, it was only natural he should tell himself she could never be more to him than a humiliating memory, a cause of gratitude for his narrow escape. It was also natural that he should take his good manners severely to task for negligence, in not having called lately on Mrs. Lascelles, and should scout the notion of being kept out of her box by anybody in the world, man or woman! So, looking paler than usual, and, for once in his life, almost pompous in his embarrassment, he tapped at the door, and found himself stumbling over a delicate little satin-shod foot belonging to Miss Ross, of whose presence, to do him justice, till he made this ungainly entrance, he had not the slightest suspicion.

"It's a good omen!" thought that quaint and speculative young person, while *her* heart too was beating faster than common. "I shall trip you up at last, sir, and what a fall I'll give you!" But she reflected also that they would probably go down together; and there was something not unpleasant in the apprehension.

Frank recovered himself sufficiently to greet Mrs. Lascelles with customary politeness, and made Helen a ceremonious bow, without offering to shake hands. She construed the omission into a studied and gratuitous slight.

So the poor girl turned once more to the stage, leaning her cheek on her hand; and wondering sadly, almost humbly, what she had done to be so punished, tried to interest herself in the progress of the opera.

A tenor, swelling in black velvet, was expressing intense adoration of some object unknown, possibly the great chandelier, at which he trilled and quavered with unflagging persistency—lifting to it

eyes, eyebrows, chest, and shoulders, rising on his toes, as if, like the skylark soaring and singing towards the light, he would fain project himself, his voice, his trunk-breeches, and his dearest affections, right through the roof!

Nor did he seem in the slightest degree influenced by suspicion or dismay, though the stage, becoming gradually darkened, filled rapidly with assassins, all wearing black cloaks, black masks, black gloves, brandishing poniards, and bursting forth—as was extremely natural in a band of paid murderers stealing on their victim—into a magnificent and deafening chorus, such as caused the very curls of the conductor to vibrate on his head, while he waved his baton to and fro in spasmodic frenzy, the crisis of a musical delirium.

It was Jin's opportunity. From her dark corner those black eyes flashed like lamps, while she murmured, under cover of the ophicleide and the big drum—

"You've never been to see us, Captain Vanguard. Rose has missed you sadly, and—and—so have I."

A vacant chair stood by her own, so close that her gown partly covered its cushion. There was obvious invitation in her gesture, while she removed the intrusive fold, and Frank dropped willingly enough into that vacant seat.

Wounded, sore, reckless, angry with one woman, he was in a mood to render the attractions of such another as Miss Ross extremely dangerous. His attention being taken off his own grievances, the cessation of pain was in itself delightful; and I fear he had too little generosity to forbear the petty triumph of showing Miss Hallaton that others could care for him even if she did not. Besides, the act

of flirting with such a professor as Jin in the dark corner of an opera-box, however dangerous, was, in itself, no unpleasant pastime; so, while Helen, cold and sick at heart, suffered herself to be deafened by chorus and orchestra, Frank, to use his own expression, "went in a perisher, and made tremendous running with Miss Ross."

She was an experienced angler, so perfect in the art that being in earnest rather increased her skill than otherwise. The popularity of our Italian opera is not entirely due to its music, the best and the highest paid for in Europe. Its boxes form also a convenient territory for the prosecution of those skirmishes which would become actual warfare but for the nature of the ground on which they take place. There are fair and dazzling visions, there are soft, sad sounds—most intoxicating when softest and saddest. There is bright glare on others, semi-obscurity for ourselves. There are sympathy, juxtaposition, a common object of interest, a necessity for whispers, and a propriety in absolute silence, which is in itself the strongest possible stimulant to conversation. Above all, there is a certain sentiment of isolation, the result of being shut up together for a definite period, that renders people mutually attractive; just as no man alive can accompany a woman, however ugly, for a long sea-voyage, and not fall in love with her to a certainty.

"You don't, and you *know* you don't," whispered Jin, in answer to some wild remark of Frank's, drowned for all ears but her own in an outrageous crash of brass instruments. "Though, mind, I won't have you fancy for a moment that I lump you in with the others, tie you all up in a bunch and label you 'Poison.' No, I shall not give you

my poor gardenia. You'll take it on to Lady Clearwell's, I daresay. But it will never get any farther than the first pretty woman you dance with. Water! Pooh! It would wither, poor thing, and much you'd care for it then! Well, if you *really* promise— No. I won't. I never did in my life, and I won't begin! You needn't move, it's only Goldie. Now *that's* a faithful admirer, if you like!"

It was indeed none other than this devoted swain, who, meekly entering, and paying homage stiffly enough to Mrs. Lascelles, seated himself between that lady and Helen, but afforded the former far the largest share of his attention and indisputable remarks on things in general.

The mistress of the box could not be said to be disappointed, though she wished it was somebody else, for her glasses were even now fixed on that somebody's drooping aristocratic old head, a dozen feet below her. Why did he not come up? She owed him the less grudge for this neglect that she had a strong conviction Sir Henry Hallaton was fast asleep in his stall.

Mrs. Lascelles stifled a sigh.

"It's up-hill work—very," she said to her own heart. "And I'm making this other poor fellow sadly wretched. He's like the people one reads about in a novel. He never complains. I wish he would! I wish he'd scold me well, and tell me what a beast I am!"

Touching his arm with her fan, while she made some trifling observation, it cut her to the quick to observe how his face brightened up, like a dog's at the voice of its master; and for the first time Mrs. Lascelles found herself entertaining a vague suspicion that it might be unwise as well as unfeeling to throw away so much confiding adoration,

to barter a reality that would last her lifetime, for a mere fancy, less tangible and less permanent than a dream. So, with half a dozen kind words, meaning nothing, she lifted this simple young man to the seventh heaven of transport, reaping, from her own act, the quiet satisfaction that follows such deeds of benevolence and common humanity.

Meanwhile, Frank had risen to go. Carefully abstaining from the slightest glance in Miss Hallaton's direction, he took an exceedingly affectionate leave of Miss Ross, and resumed his stall, which was next to that of Sir Henry, fastening a gardenia, with some little pretension, in his buttonhole.

"Been on the warpath," thought Sir Henry, waking up from a doze and observing this lately-won decoration. "Quick work. Taken a scalp already, and hanging it on his belt." Then he remembered his own daughter was in the house, and meditated grimly on the deadly penalties he would exact from any man who should be so rash as to trifle with Helen; consoled, however, by the reflection that she was the last girl in the world to yield even so light a trophy as a flower to one who had not earned it in honourable and legitimate warfare.

"What's the attraction, Jin?" asked Mrs. Lascelles, with something of irritation in her tone. "You've never taken your glasses off one spot in the stalls for the last ten minutes! Will you share the object amongst us, or must you keep it all to yourself?"

Miss Ross was never at a loss.

"It's the Tower of Babel, dear," she answered good-humouredly, "before the confusion of tongues. Did you ever see such a head! There, two rows behind Sir Henry Hallaton. The woman in pink,

with all those beads wound round her, bangles on her arms, and, I do believe, a fish-bone through her nose! I can see it, I'm sure, when she turns this way!" Thus Jin, with her glasses in her lap, with mirth and mischief in her eyes, to all appearance with no sentiment but ridicule in her heart.

Miss Ross deserved credit, I think, for unscrupulous invention and readiness of resource, also for the quickness with which she pounced on the woman in pink, a respectable matron, whose headgear, modelled after that of a notorious Parisian impropriety, was simply such as she saw worn by ladies of her own station and repute every night of her life.

Jin would have studied this apparition perhaps more attentively, but that her whole soul was projecting itself, as it were, through her glasses, towards Frank Vanguard and his gardenia. She did not regret giving it him now. She was falling horribly in love with him. How she would have hated Helen, she thought, but that she could afford to pity her!

I have said this enthusiast really enjoyed an opera, loving *fine* even more dearly than *pretty* music.

Deferring, therefore, till to-morrow the laying of plans, calculation of chances, that laborious train of reflection in which she knew too well she must collect the resources of her head to attain the desire of her heart, she sat back in her chair, and abandoned herself to one of those dreams which are perhaps the most ecstatic of all visions vouchsafed to us poor children of clay.

To repose unobserved in a corner, to drink in sounds of more than mortal sweetness, on which the soul, linked to one dear image, like Paolo in the

arms of Francesca, floats away, away through the realms of space, into the fabulous regions of unchanging, unadulterated love—is not this a happiness to which the joy of fruition, the content of security, must seem sadly tame and insipid, to which the "sober certainty of waking bliss" is but vulgar reality, clogging the wings of impossible romance?

And now the performance drew to a close. The tenor had sung his *aria* of triumphant villainy, and his *solo* of despairing remorse. The *basso*, having cursed through the whole gamut in exceedingly correct time, had fallen on his knees at the footlights, tearing a white wig, after the approved pattern of King Lear. Priests, soldiers, friars, courtiers, townsmen, stately nobles, and smiling peasant-girls, thronged the entire depth of the stage, while above the motley crowd waved and flaunted symbols of religion, spoils of warfare, and the banner of France.

The *prima donna*, venting shriek on shriek, with surprising shrillness and rapidity, had died in convulsions of unusual energy, and even repeated her demise after an enthusiastic *encore*; the orchestra, becoming louder, fiercer, faster, with each successive bar, had worked up to the grand deafening and discordant crash, which is esteemed a worthy *finale* to all great compositions, and the curtain hovering to a fall, glasses were cased, white shoulders cloaked, both on and off the stage all acting was over, and the audience rose to go away.

Let us follow Mrs. Lascelles and her party, escorted only by the constant Goldthred, as they leave their box to attain the stairs, the crushroom, the carriage, and eventually the street.

We shall not need to hurry—their progress, gaining about a yard a minute, is slow and deliberate

as a funeral. At the lowest step of the whole flight, Helen is aware of Frank Vanguard making his way through the crush, apparently with the intention of joining their party. In her distress, looking wildly round for help, she catches sight of her father's grizzled head above the surface; and, meeting his eye, telegraphs for assistance. Sir Henry, whose redeeming point is the care he takes of his daughter, makes no cessation of edging, sliding, bowing, and begging pardon, till he reaches her side, and thus places himself in a false position as regards the ladies he has lately left. They cling to him with annoying persistence, and he condemns himself, very forcibly too, though below his breath, more than once for having a daughter out, and yet choosing to know such women as Mrs. Battersea and her sister, Kate Cremorne. He must not introduce them to Mrs. Lascelles, as they obviously wish; he *will* not introduce them to Helen, though they would like this too; and how can he ignore them completely, when he is engaged to supper this very night at their house? With all his careless selfishness, it annoyed Sir Henry exceedingly to be guilty of a rudeness or unkindness towards anyone, and he formed more good resolutions to avoid doubtful society for the future in the half-dozen paces he waded through that stream of muslin four feet deep, and all the colours of the rainbow, than he had made, and broken, in his whole life before.

Ere he could accost Helen, however, assistance arrived from an unexpected quarter. Picard, who was just as sure to be at the opera as any one of the fiddles in the orchestra, recognised his fellow-travellers from Windsor with a profound and enthusiastic bow, followed by a smiling approach,

in which his teeth, his whiskers, his grin, and his stealthy yet confident demeanour, proclaimed the "tiger" of social life, not wanting in some of the attributes belonging to his nobler namesake, the terror of the jungle.

In another stride he would have offered his arm to Helen, but Mrs. Lascelles, warned by Sir Henry's eye, interposed, and seeing no other way of saving her charge, with a devotion almost maternal cast off from Goldthred and seized it herself.

"Take care of Helen!" she whispered in the latter's ear, while the flowers in her wreath brushed his very cheek. "This man mustn't take her—you understand! Come to-morrow to luncheon."

The whisper and its purport made him quite happy; Mrs. Lascelles had also the satisfaction of observing something like displeasure cloud Sir Henry's eyes as they rested on herself and her *impromptu* cavalier.

"If he's cross it shows he *cares*," was her first thought. "Ah! he'll never care like the *other one*," —her second, and that which remained longest in her mind.

The "other one," in the meantime, walked meekly on towards the carriage with Helen tucked under his elbow, thus freeing Sir Henry from his embarrassment, and leaving him at leisure to devote his attentions to Mrs. Battersea, who was, indeed, by no means inclined to let him off.

Mrs. Lascelles followed on the arm of Picard, who behaved as well as he could, though he would rather have taken Helen; these were succeeded by Jin and Frank Vanguard, apparently very well pleased with each other, and thoroughly disposed to accept the situation.

I know not what Frank whispered, but gather

that it was something complimentary by his companion's answer.

"We're not the only ones!" said Jin, looking up from under a scarlet hood, like a bewitching gipsy.

"How do you mean?" asked Frank, innocently enough.

"Don't you see your old love and Mr. Goldthred?" was the reply. "Confess now—honour! You *did* care for her once?"

"A little, perhaps," he answered lightly, though his lip quivered, and she saw it.

"But you don't now?" she pursued, leaning towards him with a gesture of confiding tenderness impossible to resist.

"You *know* I don't," he answered, and pressed the arm that rested on his own, gently but firmly to his heart.

She broke into one of those rare smiles by which, on occasion, she knew how to rivet her work so securely.

"It's a case, I'm sure!" she exclaimed. "They'll be a very happy couple, and I can wish her joy *now* with all my heart!"

CHAPTER XVIII

ATTRACTIONS

THERE are various phases of hospitality on which people depend for increase of social reputation and entertainment of their friends. One lady sets great store by her dinners, the excellence of her cook, the lighting and decorations of her table, the tact with which she selects her guests. Another believes it impossible to equal her "breakfasts," why so called I am at a loss to explain, since they take place after luncheon. A third thinks this last-named meal forms the perfection of friendly intercourse, while a fourth stands or falls by the agreeable circle she gathers round her at afternoon tea. Mrs. Battersea affected none of these. She piqued herself exclusively on her suppers; and to sup with Mrs. Battersea after the opera was to form one of a circle more remarkable for gaiety, good-humour, and general recklessness, than for wisdom, propriety of demeanour, or reputed respectability.

They were very pleasant, nevertheless, these little gatherings. She understood so thoroughly how they should be constituted, the quantity of guests, the quality of wines drunk, and the dishes set on the table. You had some difficulty in finding her house, no doubt, even if you went in a hack-cab, for it lurked in those remoter regions of

London which are to Belgravia what Belgravia must once have been to Grosvenor Square. She was a "settler," she said, and liked the wild, free life of the borders. When the real respectables, dowager peeresses and those sort of people, moved down to her, she would up stick and clear out farther west! Meantime the little house looked very charming, even at half-past twelve a.m. The delicate foliage of an acacia quivered in the light at its door; your foot trod the street pavement indeed, but your nostrils breathed the fragrance of hawthorn and hayfields, not so very far off. A flagged passage through ten feet of garden led you into a beautiful little hall with tesselated pavement, globe lamps, statuettes, flower-boxes, a fountain, and a cockatoo. On your senses stole the heavy, subtle odour of incense, the soft strains of a self-playing pianoforte, far off in some room upstairs. You were sure to be expected; no pompous auxiliary from Gunter's extorted your name, but the smoothest and lightest-footed of butlers received your overcoat and motioned you in silence towards a room, from the open door of which floods of light streamed across the carpeted passage, whence you heard the popping of corks, the *cliquetis d'assiettes*, the pleasant voices of women, the soft ripple of talk and laughter within.

You had time for scarcely a glance at that group after Watteau, that Leda in alabaster, the ormolu on velvet, the porcelain under glass, for, brushing the deep, soft carpet, with step noiseless as your conductor's, you entered an octagon room, brilliantly lighted, containing a round table on which flowers and fruit were grouped in tasteful profusion, the whole set off by a circular lamp dependent from the ceiling, and so shaded as to

throw its glare on grapes, geraniums, roses, glass and gold, table ornaments and china, glittering plate, and bubbling wine.

At this table were already seated some half-dozen noisy, pleasant individuals, when Sir Henry arrived. His entrance was the signal for a fresh burst of laughter, and a triumphant clapping of hands.

"You've won on both events, Kate," exclaimed Mrs. Battersea, making room for the belated guest by her side. "It was even betting you wouldn't come, Sir Henry. Kate shot us all round, and laid three to two you would be here before the soup was cold!"

"They thought you had been made safe, Sir Henry," said the last-named lady, whose specialty it was to speak very demurely and very distinctly. "But I knew better. Now, don't talk till you've had something to eat."

He took her advice, and glanced round the table while he sipped a clear soup—brown, strong, and restorative as sherry.

There were only two people he didn't know,—a man and a woman: the former stout, florid, bearded, deep-voiced, with the unmistakable artist type, being indeed a sculptor of no mean celebrity; the latter, wrinkled, faded, a snuff-taker, with false teeth and hair. She seemed witty and agreeable, however, fruitful in anecdote, deadly in repartee, with something of foreign buoyancy in manner.

She filled her glass, and emptied it too, pretty often. Sir Henry set her down for an Englishwoman naturalised in Paris.

The rest consisted of Picard, to whom he had lately been introduced, young Kilgarron, Frank Vanguard, and Mrs. Battersea's sister, the enterprising Kate Cremorne.

What the former had been fifteen years ago, the latter lady was now: hazel eyes, high colour, dazzling teeth, auburn hair, bright in manner, dress, and appearance. The elder sister exhausted all appliances of the toilet to put the clock back those fifteen years, and look like the younger, but in vain; nevertheless, such was the difference of their ages, that she regarded Kate less with a sister's jealousy than a mother's indulgent affection.

"So you backed me in, Miss Kate?" said the baronet, touching her glass lightly with his own, ere he drank a mouthful of champagne. "Knew I was to be depended on, didn't you? Just like a great stupid cockchafer blundering to the light? You're the light, you know, and I'm the cockchafer."

"You must be pretty well singed by this time!" answered Kate, laughing. "No; the others thought you wouldn't be allowed to get away; but I was sure you would come directly if anybody told you *not*!"

Mrs. Battersea attacked him on the other side.

"Confess, Sir Henry, you haven't heard the last of this from a certain lady whose name begins with an L. You *know* you won't dare call at No. 40 for a week!"

"Why?" he asked simply, and emptied his glass.

"Why indeed!" answered the other. "She looked as black as thunder, and absolutely scowled at me. You should have put her in the carriage, I must say."

"He couldn't!" interrupted Picard; "because I did; and two people can't perform that office unless they make a queen's cushion."

"Oh indeed!" said Miss Kate. "I suppose you think you'd do quite as well as Sir Henry. Not a bit of you. He's A1 with the ladies. Haven't you found that out in all your travels? Why the *young* woman

looked as if she'd eat poor me, when I only bowed to him! I mean the pale girl in a— Gracious! Captain Vanguard, if you like me, tell me so, or, at least, if you kick me under the table—don't kick so precious hard!"

"That was my daughter, Miss Kate," said Sir Henry, in perfect good-humour, interpreting very correctly Frank's too strenuous warning below the surface.

Kate got out of her difficulty gracefully enough.

"Your daughter!" she repeated. "And a very nice daughter too. How fond she must be of you! I should, I know!"

Here Miss Cremorne exchanged glances with Vanguard, and Sir Henry felt a vague, uncomfortable consciousness that the society was too young for him; relieved, however, by virtuous disapproval of Frank's promiscuous intimacies, and a dawning conviction that, if there had ever been any tendency to such an arrangement, he was well out of him for a son-in-law.

The sculptor now produced a velvet case of cigarettes, which was handed round, and from which even the ladies did not disdain to take a few whiffs of the most fragrant tobacco in the world; Kilgarron only asking leave to indulge in a long strong Havanna, or "roofer," as he called it,—urging that to offer a man a cigarette, when he wanted a cigar, was like giving him a slice of bread and butter when he asked for a beefsteak!

"Nonsense!" argued Mrs. Battersea. "Half a loaf is better than no bread, and half a frolic than no fun,—consequently, half a puff is better than no smoke. What do you say, Kate? That's your second cigarette already."

The girl would have made a pretty picture, leaning back on the red velvet cushion of a sofa to which

she had now betaken herself, while daintily holding the cigarette between her delicate fingers, she pursed up the rosiest and most provoking mouth imaginable to emit a long thin stream of aromatic smoke.

"What do I say?" she repeated, looking meaningly at Frank Vanguard. "That I hate half-loaves, half-frolics, half-mouthfuls, half-measures in everything! All or none, say I. Take it or let it alone!"

The foreign-looking woman tapped her snuff-box. "You're wrong," said she. "Everything in life is a matter of compromise. Besides, on your principle, my dear, you'd have all your eggs in one basket. Suppose you drop it?"

"What a mess there would be in the basket!" observed the sculptor.

"They'd make an omelette, anyhow," said Lord Kilgarron, mixing himself a brandy and soda at the sideboard.

"Besides, there are fresh ones laid every day," added Picard.

"With chickens in them," continued Mrs. Battersea, "if you'll only have patience."

"And after all, one egg is very like another," murmured Sir Henry somewhat hazily; "dress them how you please, there's generally a suspicion about them, and the freshest are rather tasteless at their best."

Frank said nothing; but thought of the eggs he had most valued in the world, their basket, and its fate. Well, he had learned his lesson now. He must make the most of a pretty painted egg he had chosen to-night, from the shelf, indeed, rather than the nest, and must abide by his selection, defying memory, prudence, common sense — defying even the bright eyes, pleasant smiles, and winning whispers of Kate Cremorne.

A man who has lost the flower he values most is perhaps never so unhappy as when he roams the garden to find a hundred others ready to be gathered, as sweet, as bright, as blooming, lacking only the subtle, special fragrance that was all in all to *him*. He is far less lonely in the desert than in that bower of beauty, which the absence of his rose—be she red, white, or yellow—has converted to a bare and dreary waste. Young hearts are sadly impatient of sorrow. Like young horses first put in harness, they are given to fret and bounce, and dash at any distraction which serves to divert their thoughts from the collar and the curb. Frank felt in no mood for self-communing to-night; but he was well disposed to snatch at any gratification the hour could afford. As the champagne mounted to his brain, Helen's pale, proud image faded into distance, and Jin's black eyes seemed to chain him in their spells. Ere long, he began to think he was a very lucky fellow after all, and exchanged jest or repartee with Kate Cremorne, as if he had not a care nor a sorrow in the world. That discriminating young person detected, nevertheless, something hollow in all this merriment.

"His heart's not in the game," she whispered to her sister, as the whole party took up a fresh position in the conservatory. "Something's gone wrong with Frank; and I think we needn't ask him to Greenwich next Sunday."

Henceforth she divided her smiles between the sculptor, whom she had known from her childhood, and Picard, on whom she bestowed perhaps the larger share, appreciating, as women do, a certain spice of the adventurer which he betrayed, without parading, in dress, manner, gestures, even in the curl of his moustache, and the turn of his well-shaped, sinewy, sunburnt hands.

Sir Henry fell to Mrs. Battersea, who encouraged him to drink more champagne than is good for anybody after one in the morning; while Frank, placidly smoking, suffered himself to be amused by the foreign-looking Englishwoman, whose spirits seemed rather to increase than diminish with the waning hours.

So the night wore on. It was already four o'clock in a bright summer sunrise, when Sir Henry—lighting a fresh cigar as he grappled to Picard's offered arm with great goodwill—expressed his intention of walking home.

"Every yard of the way, my dear fellow. Does one all the good in the world. Nothing like exercise. Never had gout, though I'm bred for it both sides; and, faith, I've earned it too! We used to live hard in my early days. But I always took a deal of exercise—always. That is why I'm pretty fresh on my legs now."

Picard assented, as younger men are bound to assent to such platitudes from their elders; and Sir Henry, whose pedestrianism was indeed of an exceedingly intermittent nature, puffing a volume of smoke in the rosy face of morning, proceeded with his reflections.

"Now, Frank and that heavy fellow have gone off together on the chance of finding a cab. Much better have footed it like you and me. 'Gad, what a lovely day it's going to be! And what a pleasant night we've had! I'm not sure, though,"—here he turned round full on his companion,—"I'm not sure we make the most of our lives, after all. Hang it! if I had to begin again, I think I'd go in more for nature. Keep always out of doors, farm more, shoot more—look after the poor, hunt the country, and never go from home. I'm

getting on now, and begin to understand the old Tartar chief, who longed for the Land of Grass when he was dying—

> 'And I would I were back in Cauca-land,
> To hear my herdsmen's horn;
> And to watch the waggons and brown brood mares,
> And the tents where I was born!'"

Picard had never read Kingsley's stirring verses. "This old chap's very drunk!" he thought; but having his own reasons for wishing to stand well with Miss Hallaton's father, he "hardened him on," as he would have called it, without remorse. "I don't think *you* can complain, Sir Henry," said he. "You've had the best of everything all your time, and can give pounds of weight to most of the young ones still. You might marry any woman in London to-morrow if you liked. I wonder you don't."

Sir Henry looked pleased.

"Marry!" he repeated. "Marry! I'm not sure that I wouldn't, only, between you and me, my dear fellow, women in general are a very inferior lot. They're delightful, I grant you, wholesale; but when you come to the retail business, as the tradesmen say, there's great risk and very little profit about the article. They don't wear well when you buy, and if you want to sell, there's no market that I know of nearer than Constantinople. I fancy the Turks understand the business; but I am *not* a Turk. Heaven forbid! Fancy a plurality of wives!"

"I'm not sure I should mind it," laughed Picard —"with the Bosphorus at one's door, of course."

"The Bosphorus wouldn't help you," said Sir Henry. "She'd come up again if she wanted, you may depend, though you sank her forty fathom

deep, with a round-shot tied to her ankles. No; I think I understand the sex thoroughly. In my own experience, I've found them perverse, wilful, obstinate."

"Unselfish, at least," put in Picard.

"Unselfish!" exclaimed the other. "Not a bit of it! They're twice as selfish as we are, and that's saying a good deal. A tyrant, indeed, keeps them down, and so long as he remains perfectly unfeeling, the thing works moderately well. But if they can get what you and I call a good fellow to marry them, why he leads the life of a galley slave! There was my poor brother Ralph—I do believe, sir, he died of it—married a pig-headed idiot without two ideas, and she traded on his kind heart till she wore it clean away. I argued the point with her once. Fancy *arguing* with a woman, and an ignorant one! 'What should *you* say,' I asked, 'if Ralph took you out partridge-shooting, we'll suppose, and kept you for hours standing in wet turnips to load for him, or carry a spare gun? Yet you have no scruple in making him accompany you to parties, which he hates far more than you would the wet turnips, and are not ashamed to speak very unkindly to him even if he *looks* bored.' 'That's nothing to do with it,' she answered.—Such is a woman's logic.—'I daresay you wouldn't stand it; but then you've more character than Ralph!' She's married a stock-jobber since. I'm happy to say he bullies her like the devil, yet I do believe she likes him twice as well as Ralph."

"But you took warning, I hope, Sir Henry," said Picard, laughing in his sleeve.

"They never tried that sort of thing with me," answered the baronet. "Still, there's no certainty

about the thing, and I fancy it's better to let it alone. Besides, one's ideas vary about women in a regular procession of decades. Up to ten, we're dependent on them; from ten to twenty, we despise them; from twenty to thirty, we adore them; from thirty to forty, we believe in them; from forty to fifty, we mistrust them; from fifty to sixty, we avoid them; from sixty to seventy, we tolerate them; and if we live any longer after that, why we become dependent on them again."

Picard burst out laughing.

"A moral lesson!" he exclaimed, "and from one who has not neglected practice in theory. Here we are at your own door, Sir Henry. I shall not forget your maxims. Good-night."

The other, feeling for his latchkey, looked up where the blinds were drawn over the windows of Helen's bed-chamber.

"There are exceptions," said he musingly, "and one good one is worth all the others put together; and yet nine-tenths of our annoyances, and all our sorrows, can generally be traced to a woman."

Picard sighed as he turned away. Men may rail as they will, but each has a secret image of his own that he esteems a pearl of exceptional price, an angel far above the common shortcomings of humanity. Like the negro with his fetish, he takes it out sometimes to blame and scold, no less than plead with and adore, but he always puts it back reverently in its place, to nestle in the warmest and most sacred corner of his heart.

CHAPTER XIX

A DRAWN BATTLE

RS. LASCELLES, retiring for the night, or rather morning, on her return from the opera, found herself beset with troubles and perplexities of unusual gravity. Taking off her ornaments, and laying them one by one on the dressing-table, she reflected sadly on the relative positions of her two greatest friends, Jin Ross and Helen Hallaton. The longer she looked at the complication the less she liked it. For a woman to entertain two lovers, as a gamekeeper hunts a brace of pointers, she considered natural enough. They should be made to range in different directions at her bidding, back each other without hesitation on her behalf, and, above all, come meekly to heel at the shortest notice when desired. This seemed only the normal condition of humanity, and in her own case, she had hitherto found such amicable arrangements answer remarkably well. Sir Henry, indeed, proved wilder than any she had hitherto endeavoured to train; but Goldthred, again, if not the most sagacious, was by far the meekest and most docile she had ever

For a moment, she laid down her brushes.

taken in hand. For a moment, she laid down her brushes, smiled at her own comely face in the glass, and by some unaccountable association of ideas, found herself wishing this last admirer would show a little more self-assertion, more enterprise, altogether borrow a leaf or two out of the black books studied over-diligently by the former.

Then she reproached herself for giving a thought to her own concerns, while Helen Hallaton looked so pale and sad, resuming the thread of her regrets with the use of her hair-brushes, and cherishing a certain impulse of womanly indignation at the idea of two young ladies being in love with one man.

The proverb affirming that "What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander," cannot assuredly be of feminine invention. The code of our fair aggressors seems framed by a justice whose scales are not duly registered, and whose bandage does not entirely cover both eyes. "If I kill *you*," seems the ladies' verdict, "justifiable homicide, and it serves you right! But if you kill *me*, it's premeditated woman-slaughter, and penal servitude for life!"

How many of us are thus transported, without really deserving it, I refrain from speculating; but I am informed by convicts themselves that good conduct is powerless to obtain any remission of sentence, and that there is no such thing as a ticket-of-leave.

Before Mrs. Lascelles got into bed, she resolved to make a touching appeal to Jin's generosity directly after breakfast, and, if need were, to back it with all the force of her own authority and moral influence.

"Moral influence!" the phrase carried with it

a weight and dignity of which she herself felt conscious, even in bed; and must be overwhelming, she thought, to "dear Jin," who owed so much to their friendship, and who had not a bad disposition after all, though too reckless, and dreadfully wedded to her own opinion, right or wrong.

Turning her back on a ridiculous little night-light, utterly useless now that morning was already streaming through heavy curtains and close-drawn window-blinds, she became more and more impressed with the difficulty of her task, as she courted sleep in vain. So many instances recurred to her of Jin's superiority in argument, of Jin's readiness in repartee, of Jin's independence of spirit and inflexible persistency in taking her own line, that she was fain to dismiss the subject from her mind, and let her thoughts wander at will through more congenial topics—her dresses, her beauty, her widowhood, her rich brown hair, the opera, the fiddles, the conductor's gloves, the tenor's black eyebrows, Goldthred's good-night, Sir Henry's back, a haze of lights, music, attentions, admiration, whiskers, boots and broadcloth, fading dimly into chaos till they left Mrs. Lascelles fast asleep.

Miss Ross, too, laid her black head on the pillow with a sensation at her heart, so new, so strange, that it took away her breath—not triumph, for it was mingled with apprehension, misgivings, and a sense of unworthiness, as humiliating as it was unexpected;—not content, for everything seemed still to gain, except the one step made to-night, that yet to lose would be simply destruction and despair; —not happiness, surely, the uncertainty was even now too painful, the rush of joy too wild and keen. How useless, how idiotic it seemed, above all, how contemptible and unlike herself, to lock the door

when she reached her room, rest her brow against the window-frame, and cry for two whole minutes like a child!

"Not for sorrow, though. Certainly not for sorrow," she murmured, recovering herself with a great sob, while she resolved to yield to such absurdity no longer.

She could hardly bring herself to believe in the reality of the last few hours. The whole thing seemed wild and improbable as a dream. It was dreadful to think she might wake up at any moment to discover that she had *not* known Captain Vanguard for a few weeks; that she had *not* set her heart on him, during the last few days, till he had become the one necessity of her existence; that she had *not* sat by his side this very evening in the gloomy back of an opera-box, and leant on his arm in the crush-room, and gathered from his looks, his gestures, nay, from his very words, that he loved her. Her, the outcast, the adventurer, the woman warring and warred against, who had vowed vengeance for her wrongs on the whole of his base and treacherous sex. Ah! if she were indeed to wake and find so cold a reality awaiting her, would it not be better to end it all and go to sleep for ever? No; like a ray of light through a cloud, like a breath of air in the noonday heat, like the song of a bird in a desert place, came the recollection of her boy. What had she done to be so blessed? To have found her child, to have found her heart, to have found, even at the same moment, the love that makes a woman humble, and the love that makes a woman proud! It seemed too much, and, for a space, Jin was so happy that she felt almost good.

In such a frame of mind people's slumbers are light and easily disturbed. Long before the maid

came in to call her, Miss Ross was wide awake, and shaping for herself a plan, to be facilitated, and even rendered necessary, by subsequent events.

Breakfast at No. 40 was a late and unpunctual meal. It was laid in the boudoir, and each lady dawdling into that apartment at her own time, rang independently for the strip of dry toast and cup of coffee that constituted her repast. Miss Ross, earlier than usual, was surprised to find her hostess already down, making pretence of breakfasting, with obvious want of appetite, and a restlessness of manner denoting that uncomfortable state of mind which the sufferer calls worry, and the bystander fuss.

Jin entered radiant. Fresh from her bath and morning toilet, she had even a tinge of colour in her cheek, the one thing usually wanting to complete her beauty. There was a light, too, dancing in her eyes, a buoyancy in her step and gesture, a sparkle, as it were, of joy and triumph in her whole bearing, that did not escape the notice of her friend.

"Late hours seem to suit you, my dear," said Mrs. Lascelles languidly. "I never saw you looking so well."

"I am a fool about music," answered the other demurely, "and I did enjoy the opera last night more than I can describe."

"The opera," asked Mrs. Lascelles quietly, "or the company?"

Jin must have been hard hit, for she actually blushed.

"Both, of course," was her reply. "Everything is pleasanter, I suppose, when it's done with pleasant people."

The tone was rather too careless, and her hand shook while she poured out a cup of coffee. Mrs.

Lascelles, noticing this trepidation, felt her heart sink within her.

"The company was pleasant enough last night," said she, "as far as our box was concerned; but I don't think people all amused themselves equally. Helen, for instance, seemed bored to death. She does not look well, and I am sure she is not happy. I'm very fond of her, Jin, and so are you. What *is* it, do you think? and how can we do her good?"

These ladies were not fairly matched. Mrs. Lascelles became flurried and nervous as she neared the point of collision. Miss Ross, on the contrary, grew steadier and cooler with the immediate approach of danger.

"I don't think Helen knows her own mind," she replied; "girls very seldom do. You must surely have observed in your personal experience, Rose, that

'Too many lovers will puzzle a maid.'"

Mrs. Lascelles accepted the implied compliment with a forced smile, but it did not turn her from her object.

"Helen is unlike most girls," she answered; "and I don't fancy any number of lovers would make amends to her for losing the one she has set her heart on. People are so different, you know, and Helen's is one of those deep, quiet, reserved natures that suffer awfully, though they suffer in silence. I think, Jin, between you and me, that Helen likes Somebody, and that Somebody would like her if it wasn't for Somebody else!"

Though almost sublime in its ambiguity, Miss Ross understood this "dark sentence" perfectly, and scorned to affect misconception of its purport.

"You mean Captain Vanguard!" She came out with his name in a burst of defiance. "Well, how can I help that?"

"Oh, Jin, as you are strong be merciful!" pleaded Mrs. Lascelles. "You know your own power. You know you are one of the most taking creatures in the world if you only try. Look at Uncle Joseph, look at even Mr. Goldthred, though I consider him the truest of the true. Look at Sir Henry. To be sure, it's no compliment from *him*, for he's the same to everybody. Look at all the men who come near us. You needn't even take the trouble of shooting, like Mr. Picard's American colonel and his squirrel—down they come at once. Can't you let this squirrel alone? Can't you leave him to Helen, dear? Everybody will be so pleased, and I should be *so* much obliged to you, Jin, if you would!"

Miss Ross laughed. "The last is certainly a strong inducement," said she; "but it seems to me you are leaving the squirrel's own inclinations out of the question. Because he comes down for Colonel Crockett, does it follow he'll be so obliging to everybody else? I suppose Frank—I mean Captain Vanguard—has a perfect right to talk to me instead of Miss Hallaton, if he is more amused in my society than in hers."

"Amused!" repeated Mrs. Lascelles, growing warm. "This is no question of amusement. It is a life's happiness or misery for two people who ought never to have been interfered with. You have no right to supplant her; you have no right to trifle with him!"

"Suppose I am *not* trifling," retorted the other. "Suppose I am in earnest, just for once, by way of change. You have complimented me on my

powers, in sport. Do you think I should be a less dangerous enemy, Rose, if I were fighting for my life?"

"You remember our agreement," exclaimed Mrs. Lascelles with rising colour, and a shake in her voice, denoting wrath no less than a nervous dread of its indulgence. "You are not acting fairly by me; you're not acting fairly by any of us. If you turn round now, after what you've told me, after what we agreed, I can never trust you again, Jin. I shall think you've been sailing under false colours all through."

"Explain yourself, Rose," said Miss Ross, very quietly, but with an ominously steady expression about the lower part of her face, in strong contrast with the quivering lips and tremulous chin of her companion.

"You ought to see it yourself," whimpered the latter, now in a sore predicament between her feelings of friendship and generosity. "I shall say something to be sorry for afterwards. I know I shall. You'll drive me to it, Jin! and when I am driven, I can't and won't stop!"

"You seem to expect that my thoughts, feelings, and opinions are to be under your control, as you would have my actions and conversation," was the grave and rather stern rejoinder. "This is not dependence, Mrs. Lascelles, but slavery. You are not only unkind, but unreasonable and unjust."

Mrs. Lascelles turned very red. She was now obviously "driven," as she called it, and not likely to stop.

"What I expect," she retorted, "is nothing to the purpose; for there seems little chance of my obtaining it. What I insist on is common propriety

of demeanour, and the merest fair play. You would never have met these people at all—you would never have been in a position to know any one of them, but for me. You are received amongst them as—as—like anybody else, and you throw down the apple of discord to set us all at sixes and sevens. You seem to forget, Miss Ross, that your victims are my personal friends."

"And what am I?" retorted Jin, with an angry flash from her black eyes. "Something between a companion and a servant! A piece of furniture good enough for the drawing-room, though occasionally useful in the kitchen! The obligations are not perhaps so entirely on one side as you would like to make out. When people hunt in couples, a good deal may be done that it would be madness to attempt singly. It cannot but be convenient for an independent lady to have a friend at her elbow who is always well disposed, always ready to go anywhere, or do anything, generally good-tempered, and, above all, afflicted with an intermittent defect of sight or hearing as required. I think I have earned my wages, and returned adequate value in kind for board and lodging,—both, I must admit, of the best,—and treatment, I am happy to think, of the kindest and most considerate, till to-day!"

Touched to the quick by this last reproach, Mrs. Lascelles was already crying vehemently.

"It's not that!" she sobbed out. "It's not that! I don't want to remind you of anything that's past and gone. But you ought to do what I ask you in common gratitude because—because—you know you ought!"

Seeing the adversary wavering, Miss Ross stood firm to her guns.

"Gratitude," said she, "is one thing, and

obedience another. I admit that I owe the first, and hoped I had shown some consciousness of the debt. The last is a different question, and I am not naturally very submissive. But, come. Let us have a clear understanding. I am ready to receive your orders!"

"Orders!" Mrs. Lascelles fired up once more. "You've no right to put it in that way. But it's no use talking the thing over backwards and forwards. You've barely known him a fortnight. In plain English, will you or will you not give Frank Vanguard up?"

Jin laughed scornfully.

"Suppose he won't give *me* up?"

"That's nothing to do with it," retorted the other. "Once for all, Miss Ross, will you or will you not?"

"No, I won't! There!"

Jin looked very handsome while she thus raised the standard of revolt, with her head up, her eyes flashing, and a little spot of colour in each cheek.

Mrs. Lascelles now lost all control over her temper. Totally unused to anger, she trembled violently under its influence, and felt, indeed, that no victory, however triumphant, could repay her for the tumult of such a contest.

"Under these circumstances," said she, vainly endeavouring to steady her voice, and assume that dignity of bearing to which only last night her moral influence had seemed to entitle her, "it is impossible that you and I can continue on the same terms. It is impossible that we can remain under the same roof. You will see the propriety, Miss Ross, at your earliest convenience of making arrangements to reside elsewhere."

"The sooner the better," answered Jin calmly. "I'll go directly. My things are packed. We won't part in anger, Mrs. Lascelles. Rose, you've been very, *very* good to me, and I shall think kindly of you as long as I live!"

The tide of battle was now completely turned. It may be that the conqueror was eagerly looking for an opportunity to lay down her arms—it may be that Mrs. Lascelles had only meant to threaten, and hated herself for the menace even while it crossed her lips. She was, at anyrate, quite incapable of hitting an adversary when down, and far more inclined to set a fallen foe upright, and make friends, than, like some Amazons, to crush and trample the unfortunate into the dust. She literally fell on Miss Ross's neck, and wept.

"I didn't mean it!" she sobbed. "I didn't mean it! Jin, dear Jin, I was angry, and didn't know what I was saying! I am a wretch and a heathen and a beast! Think no more of it, dear, I implore you! And promise me that you won't dream of packing up your things and leaving me. What should I do without you, Jin? Indeed—indeed—I should be perfectly miserable, dear, if you were to go away!"

So the ladies embraced, and cried, and laughed, and cried again, as is the manner of their sex in the ratification of all treaties, permanent or otherwise, arriving at the conclusion that their friendship was imperishable, that they were all in all to each other, and that henceforth nothing should part them but the grave. None the less, however, did Miss Ross determine that she would subject herself no more to such scenes of reproach and recrimination; that she would take a certain step, only, after all, a little sooner than expected, which she had already

vaguely contemplated as a possibility, a probability, nay, a positive necessity, for her happiness; and, if he would only open them to receive her, throw herself, without delay, into the arms of Frank Vanguard.

CHAPTER XX

A RECONNAISSANCE

VIOLENT tempests like that described in the last chapter do not pass away without leaving a ground swell, as it were, on the domestic surface. Neither Mrs. Lascelles nor Miss Ross felt disposed to take their usual drive in the open carriage for the purpose of shopping and leaving cards; two functions that constitute the whole duty of women, from three to six p.m. of every week-day, during the London season. The principle of acquisitiveness inherent in the female breast, together with an insatiable desire to see and to be seen, may account for the shopping; but why society enjoins the penance of leaving cards surpasses my comprehension altogether. Unmeaning, endless, and exceedingly troublesome, this custom seems to produce no definite result, but to fill the waste-paper basket with a multitude of other cards left in return. To-day, however, the ladies at No. 40 resolved they would devote their afternoon to refreshment and repose; a good luncheon, a comfortable arm-chair, the newest novel, and a casual dropping in of visitors to tea.

The luncheon was heavy, the arm-chair provocative of slumbers; so was the novel; and Mrs. Lascelles, I am bound to admit, went fast asleep over its pages; while Miss Ross stole softly up-

stairs to read one important little note, write another, and otherwise bring her schemes to maturity.

In the meantime, a considerable bustle was going on in Messrs. Tattersall's celebrated emporium for the sale of horses—good, bad, and indifferent. To use correct language, "The entire stud of a nobleman, well known in Leicestershire," was being brought to the hammer; and a very motley crowd of sportsmen, dandies, horse-dealers, lords, louts, yeomen, yokels, and nondescripts were gathered round the auctioneer's box in consequence. A well-bred chestnut horse, with magnificent shoulders, and a white fore-leg, was the object of competition at the moment Sir Henry Hallaton entered the yard; and, although he neither wanted a hunter, nor could have afforded to buy this one even at its reserved price, it was not in his power to refrain from elbowing his way through the crowd, and stationing himself in perilous vicinity to the hind-legs of the animal.

"Handsome—fast—up to great weight—with a European reputation! And only two hundred bid for him?" said the voice of Fate from under an exceedingly well-brushed and rather curly-brimmed hat; while the object of these encomiums, whose restless eye and ear denoted excitement, if not alarm, gave a stamp of his foot and a whisk of his tail that caused considerable swaying, surging, and treading on toes in the encircling crowd.

"Ten! Twenty!" continued the voice of Fate. "Thirty! Thank you, my lord. Fifty! Two hundred and fifty bid for him. Run him down once more. Take care!" And Sir Henry found himself jostled against his new friend Picard, who, having made the last bid with an assumption of

great carelessness, seemed in danger of becoming the actual proprietor of this desirable purchase.

"Make me a wheeler, I think," said he, as the horse was led back to the stable, and another brought out to elicit a fresh burst of competition, all the more lively, perhaps, that the Leicestershire nobleman had put such a reserve price on his stud as precluded the sale of anything but a hack he didn't like.

"Rather light for harness," observed Sir Henry, with a certain covert approval of his friend's extravagance. "I suppose they *are* to be sold?" he added, on further reflection.

"I conclude so, of course," replied the other, though he well knew they were *not*, and had been bidding pompously for some half-dozen with the comfortable conviction that there was nothing to pay for his whistle.

"It's a long price," resumed the baronet, as he took Picard's arm to saunter leisurely in the direction of Belgravia. "At least, it makes them very dear when you come to match them. That's the worst of having too good a team."

"Oh! I don't know," said Picard loftily. "I always find it cheapest, in the long-run, to drive the best horses, though I do have to give thundering prices now and then, I admit. Still, things must begin to look up for us soon. We Southern proprietors can't be always on the shady side of the hedge; and we've had a rough time of it enough, in all conscience."

They were already at the gate, and it appeared this "Southern proprietor" had no intention of buying any more horses to-day.

Sir Henry hazarded a pertinent, or, as he himself considered it, an *im*pertinent, inquiry.

"Have you much property," said he, "in the South? And do you get anything from it?"

"Not perhaps what *you* would call much, in actual value," answered his companion; "but for extent, of course, unlimited." He waved his arm as Robinson Crusoe might, while describing his circle—

"From the centre all round to the sea."

"But American property," he added, "is so difficult to define. Holloa! here's our friend Vanguard."

That gentleman was indeed strolling leisurely into the yard, apparently with no particular object, for he strolled out again willingly enough at the invitation of his two friends.

"It's rather early for the Park," observed Picard, as the three crossed to the shady side of the street, "and too late for St. James's Street. What shall we do with ourselves for the next half-hour?"

"Go and look at the Serpentine—see if it's still there," said Frank, who seemed in unusually high spirits, though his manner was somewhat restless. "If that bores you, there's always the British Museum. It's cool, and, I've been told, very solitary."

"Too far off," answered Sir Henry, in perfect good faith. "No. I'll tell you what. Let's go and ask Mrs. Lascelles to give us a cup of tea."

Frank started, and his heart thumped against a little note lying in his waistcoat-pocket; but, though the thump was for Helen, the note was from someone very different to that well-conducted young lady. Was he disloyal enough, even now, to leap at the chance of seeing Miss Hallaton just once more, and for the last time? If so, he was doomed to be disappointed, and it served him right.

Picard, who carried no notes of any description in his pockets, and whose heart seldom beat unless he walked fast up-hill, agreed willingly to the baronet's proposition. He, too, entertained a vague sentiment of admiration for Helen, capable of soon ripening into something warmer if she had any fortune, and under such circumstances his game now was to see as much of her as he could.

Thus it fell out, that these three gentlemen, arriving at Mrs. Lascelles's door, found themselves face to face with Uncle Joseph, fresh from the City, who had just rung the bell, and was utilising his time by grinding a pair of thick soles fiercely against the scraper.

It would have amused a bystander to observe the effect produced on each visitor by the footman's appearance and the information he tendered.

"Has Miss Hallaton been here?" said Sir Henry, whose position on the top step gave him priority of speech with the doorkeeper.

"Called to leave a note after luncheon, Sir Henry, and I was to say she'd a-gone out driving with Lady Sycamore, and wouldn't be home till seven, if you came for her here."

Picard, pulling out a memorandum-book, muttered that "he had forgotten an appointment at his club," while Frank's face darkened, and he smothered something between an oath and a sigh.

"Is Miss Ross at home?" then demanded Uncle Joseph, with the air of a man who submits to an unnecessary formality in compliance with the usages of society.

"Miss Ross had stepped out—oh! not five minutes ago—the gentleman might almost have met her at the corner of the street."

Frank now seemed uneasy, looked at his watch, observed it was "rather too late to call," and disappeared.

Uncle Joseph gasped. Did Miss Ross leave no message? For *him*—Mr. Groves? Was the man quite sure?

The man was quite sure, so far as he knew; should he ask the maid?

"D—n the maid!" I am sorry to say, was Uncle Joseph's reply, and without further leave-taking he bustled off in a towering passion, while Sir Henry and the footman, on the doorstep, contemplated each other in some amusement and no little surprise.

The baronet broke into a laugh.

"You soon clear off your visitors, James. Is Mrs. Lascelles at home to me?"

"Certainly, sir! Yes, sir! In the boodore, sir!" answered James. "I'd just taken in tea when you rang."

So Sir Henry found himself *tête-à-tête* with the lady for whom, during the foregoing winter, he had half felt and half professed a spurious kind of attachment, and was conscious of an uncomfortable wish that he, too, had made his escape with the others, or that it had never entered his head to come to tea at all.

She was always gracious, just as she was always well-dressed. There is a dignity and a decency of beauty, which nothing will induce a beautiful woman to forego. It was a very cool and steady hand that Mrs. Lascelles tendered to her vacillating admirer, while she bade him sit down, and poured him out a cup of tea.

"I was on the point of writing to you," said she; "but you have saved me the trouble. I wanted to

see you, Sir Henry, very much. I have something particular to say."

He bowed, and settled himself in a low easy-chair with his back to the windows. No faded beauty of the other sex could have entertained a greater objection than Sir Henry to flourishing crowsfeet and wrinkles in the light of day.

"It's no wonder I'm here," was the smiling reply, "for I always want to see you!"

"And without anything particular to say," she retorted, adding hurriedly—"However, that's not the point. Sir Henry, you care for your daughter?"

"More than for anything in the world!" was his grave rejoinder.

"I know it—I know it," she answered, and the colour deepened in her cheek. "Well, now, men are blind as bats, I think, in all matters of affection; but have you not lately noticed an alteration in Helen's manner, spirits, in her very looks? Can't you see there's something wrong with the girl? Can't you guess what it is?"

He looked startled, disturbed, distressed.

"Not the lungs, Mrs. Lascelles!" he exclaimed. "She runs upstairs like a lapwing, and will waltz for twenty minutes together at a spin. There can't be much amiss. Not her lungs surely; nor her heart!"

Mrs. Lascelles laughed.

"Yes, her heart," she repeated, "though not in the sense you mean. Not anatomically but sentimentally, I fear; which is sometimes almost as bad."

He looked immensely relieved.

"Oh! she'll get over that," said he, putting more sugar in his tea. "She's a sensible girl, Helen, with a good deal of self-respect, and what I

should call mind. No whims, no fancies, in any way, and not the least romantic."

"Like her papa," observed Mrs. Lascelles maliciously.

"I trust in Heaven *not*!" he replied, with unusual energy. "Helen is as much my superior in intellect as she is in moral qualities. She has talent, energy, self-control, and self-denial; none of which, I fear, can she inherit from *me*. Her sincerity, too, and trustfulness are like a child's, and she is as fond of me now as she was at two years old. You don't think she *really* cares for anybody, do you, Mrs. Lascelles? It might be a serious thing for her if she did, and I had rather everything I have in the world went to ruin than that Helen should be made unhappy."

"I do," answered Mrs. Lascelles. "I think she cares for Frank Vanguard."

"Confound him!" ejaculated Sir Henry, upsetting his teacup. "A presuming young jackass! And not over-steady, I'm afraid," he added, reverting in his own mind to certain memories connected with supper, cigarettes, champagne, three o'clock in the morning, and Kate Cremorne.

"Now that's so like a man!" said his hostess. "You want to keep your treasure all to yourself, and are furious with everybody who agrees with you in appreciating its value. Captain Vanguard is young, good-looking, a gentleman, and not badly off. Why shouldn't your daughter like him, and why shouldn't he like your daughter? Sir Henry, I needn't ask if you believe in my inclination, do you also believe in my ability to serve you?"

"Certainly," was the polite reply. "Nobody is half so clever, and, besides, you are a perfect woman of the world."

"Will you be guided by my advice?"

"What do you propose?" was the natural answer to so comprehensive a question.

"Get Helen out of town at once. Carry her off to Windsor. I can take upon myself to offer you the Lilies. Uncle Joseph will lend the cottage to me or any of my friends, for as long as I like. Give her plenty of amusement, but no dissipation. Early hours, a glass of port-wine and a biscuit every day at twelve, and don't let her stay out after sundown. In three weeks the girl will be in rude health, or I know nothing of a woman's constitution and ailments."

"But what has all this to do with Captain Vanguard?" asked Sir Henry, fixing in his mind, not without effort, the whole regimen, particularly the port-wine at twelve o'clock.

"Oh! blindest of baronets!" laughed Mrs. Lascelles. "Lady Sycamore, or any other chaperon, would have seen it at once. Captain Vanguard is quartered at Windsor. Helen is staying at the Lilies. The young people meet every day. A mutual attachment, already, I firmly believe, in the bud, comes to maturity. General *tableau!* You give your blessing, and will become, I hope, more respectable as a father-in-law than you have hitherto been in other relations of life."

"I'll do anything for Helen—anything!" said Sir Henry vehemently. "And how can I thank you enough, Mrs. Lascelles, for your kindness and the interest you take in my girl? You'll come down every Saturday, and stay till Monday, to see how your prescription answers, of course?"

"Not the least of course," she replied. "Jin and I mean to take ourselves off to Brighton by the end of

the week. If the fine weather lasts, we shall very likely go on to Dieppe."

This, then, was her kindly scheme: to get Miss Ross out of Frank Vanguard's way to leave the coast clear for Helen; and then, having settled matters to her own satisfaction, weigh Sir Henry deliberately against Goldthred, and take whichever she considered most deserving of herself.

Mrs. Lascelles never doubted her power over anyone on whom she chose to exert it, and believed that, like a spider, she need only spin her web in order to surround the desired bluebottle inextricably with its toils.

In hers, as in similar cases, I imagine that to break boldly through the meshes was the insect's best chance of turning the tables, and taking the custodian herself into custody.

"Miss Ross goes with you?" asked Sir Henry meditatively, though I believe he was thinking less of that black-eyed syren than of his daughter.

"Miss Ross goes with me, undoubtedly," was the answer, spoken rather sharply, and in some little displeasure. "Have you any objection? Can't you bear to part with her even for so short a period? You see, I know all about *that* too."

Sir Henry never seemed to have any sense of shame. He couldn't have blushed to save his life. To this callousness he owed many of his successes, and almost all his scrapes.

He smiled pleasantly. "You know all about everything, I believe," said he; "and you *think* you know all about me. But you don't, and I don't; and nobody does, I fancy. I'm so different from what I feel sure I was intended to be, that I sometimes suspect, like the Irishman, they changed me at nurse. Only, if I were somebody else, that

wouldn't account for it, after all, would it? These are puzzling speculations; but I know I *could* have been a better and a very different man. It's not my fault."

"Whose, then?" she asked, bending her blue eyes on him with an expression of interest extremely dangerous for a man at any age.

He scarcely marked it. He was searching out the truth for once from the depths — not very profound — of his world-worn heart, and had forgotten during the moment that false and fleeting woman-worship which had so weakened and deteriorated his nature. Looking back along the path of life on which, as in some idolatrous grove, his every step had been marked by a soulless image of brass, or stucco, or marble, reared only to be defaced and overthrown, he was scarcely conscious of that lovely living companion, listening with all the attention of curiosity and self-interest to his retrospections.

"Yours!" he answered — ("Now it's coming," she thought) — "Yours! Not individually, but collectively, as of that sex which seems to be the natural bane of ours. If I could begin again, I would forswear female society altogether. I should be a better, and certainly a happier man. As it is, my life has been wasted in looking for something I always failed to find. Did you ever see Grantley Berkeley's book? There it is on the table. I daresay you've never looked into it. Read it, if you want to find poetry in sport. He seems to entertain a gentle, kindly feeling for every living creature, wild or tame. He tells a story of one of his hounds — Champion or Challenger, if I remember right—that used to detach itself from the pack on hunting mornings, and come to its mistress's

pony-chaise for a morsel of biscuit and a caress. Ever afterwards, when drafted into another county, the faithful, true-hearted dog would break away, and gallop up to every open carriage that arrived at the meet, returning from each succeeding disappointment with a sadder expression on his wise, honest face — a more piteous look in his meek, brown, wistful eyes. I've been like poor Champion or Challenger. So often, I've thought I had found my heart's desire at last! Then I strained every nerve to win, and *did* win, too, only to learn, over and over again, that she had not deceived me half so deeply as I had deceived myself. Shall I confess that the woman who, in my whole life, has approached nearest the ideal of my heart, was one whom my reason, my experience, and my moral sense, deteriorated though it is, convicted as the vilest and the worst?"

Few people had ever seen Sir Henry in earnest. Certainly not Mrs. Lascelles; and she was almost frightened.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed. "After such an experience, you'll surely never try again?"

He seemed to wake up from a dream. The ruling passion was not to be controlled; and habit, stronger than nature, impelled him, though for the hundredth time, to recommence the old story in the old familiar strain.

"Just once more," he said, drawing his chair nearer the frail spider-legged tea-table that constituted the only barrier between them. "It's hard if a man seeks all his life without finding his object at last. Mrs. Lascelles, may I not say"—

In another moment she might have had the satisfaction of hearing, and perhaps repelling, a fervent declaration of attachment; but, at this

juncture, the door of the boudoir was thrown open, and the announcement of "Lady Clearwell!" by James in person, ushered in an exceedingly courteous and sprightly personage, all smiles and rustle, who called Mrs. Lascelles "Rose," took her by both hands, and, with a distant bow to Sir Henry, dropped on the sofa as if she meant to make herself perfectly at home.

Such interruptions are almost a matter of course. There was nothing for it but to take up his hat and make his bow.

It may be that Sir Henry, walking soberly downstairs, reflected, not without gratitude, how such little *contretemps* constitute the great charm and safeguard of society in general.

Lady Clearwell stayed till nearly seven. As her carriage rolled away, Mrs. Lascelles looked wistfully at the clock, and called over the banisters to James—

"I'm not at home to anybody *now*, except Mr. Goldthred."

But Mr. Goldthred never came.

CHAPTER XXI

THE SOHO BAZAAR

FRANK VANGUARD, leaving the threshold of No. 40 with unusual alacrity, lost no time in securing one of the many hansom cabs that are to be found crawling about Belgravia, plentiful as wasps on wall-fruit, every summer's afternoon. "Soho Bazaar," said he. "Don't go to sleep over it!" And so found himself, in less than a quarter of an hour, at the door of that heterogeneous emporium. It did not seem to surprise him in the least, that, while he paid his driver, the well-known figure of Miss Ross should precede him into the building, nor that he should come upon her, minutely examining ornaments of bog-oak, at the very first counter which offered a secluded corner for confidential communication. The place seemed well adapted for secrecy; purchasers, it appeared, there were none, while the sellers, women of various ages and costumes, were mostly nodding drowsily behind their wares.

Jin looked up from a clumsy black cross set in Irish diamonds, and her eyes flashed brighter than the spurious gems while, putting her hand in Frank's arm, she nestled to his side, as though henceforth her refuge was there alone.

"You got my note?" she whispered. "I didn't know what to do. My only chance was to see you

at once, and I could think of no place so good as this."

"Dearest!" he murmured, pressing the arm that clung so fondly to his own, looking about him, nevertheless, in uncomfortable apprehension of observant bystanders, or sharp-sighted acquaintance.

"I have had such a battle to fight," she continued, leading him into a grove of waving drapery, consisting chiefly of clothing for young people. "If I hadn't felt I could depend upon you, I think I must have given way. I've behaved so badly to Mrs. Lascelles, so cruelly to Mr. Groves. I've done so wrong by everybody but *you*."

"Dearest!" he repeated, with another squeeze. His ideas were gradually deserting him, nor did he know exactly what he was expected to say in reply.

"They all wanted to persuade me," she continued. "They all wanted to talk me into it; and in my position, so completely friendless and forlorn, it would have been an excellent arrangement, of course—far the wisest thing to do. But I couldn't. No, I couldn't, when I thought of you."

"I didn't quite make out from your note," said Frank, collecting his wits with some difficulty. "You wrote it in a hurry, I daresay. You mentioned something about old Groves. Had he—had he the impudence to ask you to marry him?"

She turned round with a comical expression of mingled pain and amusement in her face.

"Do you think it requires so much effrontery?" she demanded. "Recollect my position, or rather total want of it. Recollect that Mr. Groves is rich, amiable, kind-hearted, and, after all, not so *very* old, that is, for a man. Just the sort of person to make a good, trustworthy, affectionate husband."

"Then why didn't you take him?" said Frank,

but the tone of pique in which he spoke told Miss Ross the game was in her own hand.

She let go his arm, looking reproachfully into his very eyes.

"Can *you* ask me, Captain Vanguard?" she exclaimed, in sorrowful accents, stopping short under a pair of elaborate blue knickerbockers, ticketed seven-and-nine. "If so, I have indeed acted madly in meeting you here to-day. No; let go my hand. Before I walk a step farther tell me if you really mean what you say!"

"You know what I mean," he answered in an agitated whisper. "You know that you are everything in the world to me. That if you took up with any other fellow you would drive me mad, and that I would rather we were both in our graves than you should marry such a guy as old Groves!"

They were pacing on through the bazaar once more, Frank having repossessed himself of his companion's arm, while he made the foregoing statement, with every appearance of earnestness and truth.

Jin stopped short at a counter, on which were displayed a variety of children's toys in gaudy profusion.

"What a love!" she exclaimed, pouncing on a parti-coloured little figure-of-fun with bells at all its angles. "Twelve-and-sixpence? Put it up for me, please. Captain Vanguard, don't look so astonished. It's only a plaything for my boy!"

Frank's eyes opened wide; perhaps for that reason his ears failed to detect something forced and embarrassed in the laugh with which Miss Ross greeted his surprise.

"I have no secrets from you *now*," she continued. "You and I must trust each other entirely, or not

at all. I have never told you about my boy, but I cannot and will not give him up, even for you, Frank. Take me with my emcumbrances, or not at all. *C'est tout simple!*" Watching his looks as the steersman watches a coming wave, something warned her to avoid the imminent shock. Like a skilful pilot, she luffed, so to speak, several points to the windward of truth.

"He has nobody else to depend on in the world," she said, eyeing Frank's face with a touching and plaintive gaze. "People blame me, I daresay, but I know I'm doing right, for after all, is he not my own sister's child?"

Frank drew a long breath, looking immensely relieved, yet conscious the while of a vague perception, not entirely agreeable, that the last link in his fetters was about to be riveted for good and all.

"You're an angel," said he—"a real angel, I do believe. I begin to see it more every day. At first, I used to think you could be very wicked if you chose. Tell me all about it. I know you will tell me the"—

He could not have believed those slender fingers were strong enough to inflict such a grip as at this moment interrupted his sentence and hurried him on to a different part of the bazaar so rapidly as to entail no small risk of upsetting many fragile articles exposed for sale at the corners of the different stalls; not, however, before he was aware of an exceedingly frigid bow from Lady Shuttlecock, a stare of unbounded astonishment from at least two of her daughters, and a wink of intense amusement from Kilgarron, who, surrounded by children of all sizes, was obviously in attendance on aunt, cousins, and relations of every degree.

This numerous family-party did not affect to conceal their surprise at Frank's appearance in such an unlikely place and with so charming a companion. Had the pair walked boldly up to Lady Shuttlecock to exchange with these new arrivals the customary greetings of people who see each other much oftener than they desire, it would probably have been inferred that Mrs. Lascelles was shopping in some other part of the building, and no further notice would have been taken of the circumstance; but Jin's sudden flight, the result perhaps of studied calculation, was compromising in the last degree, and her ladyship, gathering her brood around her, began to fan herself with a vigour of disapproval not calculated to cool an exuberant matron in the dog-days. As her head, rising inch by inch, attained the level from which propriety looks down on indiscretion, she turned fiercely to Kilgarron, and observed, as if it was *his* fault—

"Most extraordinary! *Your* friend Captain Vanguard, and, of all people in the world, Miss Ross!"

"It couldn't have been Miss Ross, mamma," interposed Lady Selina in sprightly innocence. "She never would have run away from us as if we'd got the plague."

"Nonsense, Selina," said her sister. "She was ashamed of herself, and well she might be. I always thought her an odious person; and as for *your* friend, Kil, I don't believe he's much better."

"Bother!" replied Kilgarron. "She's his cousin, sure! Mayn't a man take his cousin to the Soho Bazaar, and buy fairings for her? Never say it! I'll be emptying the counter here for mine this minute!"

So popular a declaration was received by the young fry with acclamations that reached the ears of Frank and Jin, who had retired for sanctuary to the loneliness of the picture-room.

"I am lost *now*!" exclaimed the latter, really out of breath from the pace at which they fled. "It will be all over London to-night. The girls hate me like poison. The mother's the greatest gossip in Europe. Lord Kilgarron will make a joke of it at the mess-table! Captain Vanguard—Frank—what is to become of me? Don't look so cross! What am I to do?"

He pondered. His face was very grave—almost, as she said, cross. Suddenly it lighted up, smiling fondly down into her own.

"There is a very easy way out of it," he said—"a way to stop all their mouths; but perhaps you wouldn't like it!"

"To marry Mr. Groves?" said she, with one of her most mischievous glances and her merriest laugh.

He laughed in concert.

"If you like, darling," he answered, "at some future time; but not whilst I am alive. It's my turn first."

"Oh, Frank!" was all she said; and for a moment she felt she loved him too dearly to sacrifice him to such a fate.

But the temptation was overwhelming. So many considerations crowded on her brain: her state of dependence, now more than ever irksome since the late difference with Mrs. Lascelles; the awkwardness of meeting Uncle Joseph daily, and the impossibility of refusing to give him a decided answer; the equal impossibility, after all she had led him to expect, of saying anything but Yes; the

delight—and this to one of her temperament and antecedents was not without considerable charm—of anything like an elopement or a clandestine marriage, not counting the triumph of carrying off such a prize as Frank Vanguard from the many women who would be too happy to make him their lawful prey; the impression—vague, unreasoning, and essentially feminine—that such a step would free her at once and for ever from any claim Picard might advance on her person, her belongings, or her child; finally, and it is only justice to insist that this was the strongest inducement of all — the undisturbed possession of that child, whom she resolved to carry off with her in her flight, but whose relationship to herself, it pained her to think, she must now disguise for evermore.

Vanguard, drawing her towards him, was surprised to find the tears running down her cheeks.

He didn't care if a hundred Lady Shuttlecocks were watching; he wound his arm round her waist, and she buried her face impulsively in his breast. For half a minute or so, they were both very much in earnest and very happy.

Then she looked up, and adjusted her bonnet with a smile.

"How shocked St. Sebastian will be!" she observed; that sparingly-clothed martyr, execrably painted, having indeed been the only witness of this improper ebullition.

"It must be done at once," said Frank; now that he was fairly in for it, characteristically keen and impatient of inaction. "You can't go back to No. 40. I won't have you persecuted by that old idiot Groves. We ought to start from here, you and I, just as we are—swagger into the first church

that we see — they're always open — and get it over."

She smiled very sweetly now on his impatience.

"You rash, inconsiderate darling!" she said. "That's impossible. I wish it wasn't. No. You shall be guided by me, and let me have my own way. In the first place, I must go back to No. 40 for many reasons. Well, if you insist on knowing, I must get some more things. I am very glad you like this dress; but it wouldn't do for one's whole outfit. Don't look so alarmed; my wardrobe is not very large, and I know where I can have it taken care of without dragging about with me more than I require. To-morrow I shall be free."

"And to-morrow I must be at Windsor—at least in the afternoon," observed Frank in an injured tone. "Why the colonel can't inspect my young horses without me I don't know. The whole lot are not worth five pounds. But I can get away by six o'clock."

"At Windsor!" repeated Jin. "The very thing. Now listen, Frank, and I will arrange it all in a way that will disarm suspicion, and leave no trace of us after we have made our escape. You shall go down to your barracks and attend to your duties like a good boy. I mean you to be always subservient to discipline. When your colonel has done with you it will be my turn. You will get into a skiff, or whatever you call it—a boat that has room enough for two people, and cushions, and all that—you shall row it to the very place I got in at —don't you remember—the day you saved my life? and—and you will find me waiting there. Take me or leave me; as I said before, Frank, I have nobody in the world now but you."

He lifted her hand passionately to his lips.

"Take you!" he repeated, "I should think I *would!* But how are you to get out of London? What excuse can you make to Mrs. Lascelles?"

She hated herself that she could lie to him, and yet such is the force of habit, such are the exigencies of a life like hers, the ready falsehood came glib to her tongue.

"We are all going to the Lilies for a day or two," she said. "Miss Hallaton is to be there, with Mrs. Lascelles, on a visit."

Even now he winced as if he was stung, at the bare mention of Helen's name. The sensation was painful in the extreme, though qualified by gratified vanity, and a certain bitter satisfaction in the justice of his reprisals.

She read him like a book. If she had ever wavered for a moment, if her better nature had ever warned her to spare the man's future because she loved him, all such considerations were utterly set aside in that passion for rivalry which has driven so many women to destruction, and by which Miss Ross was certainly not less affected than the rest of her sex.

In all matters of love, war, pleasure or business, Frank had a great idea of sailing with the tide. So long as things went smoothly, his maxim was to "let the ship steer herself," a method of navigation both safer and more successful than people generally imagine. He assented with the utmost devotion to all Jin's arrangements, even in their most trifling details, and did not even protest against her cruelty in cutting short their interview, and imperatively forbidding him to accompany her any part of the way home.

"You see I trust you in everything," said he, as he bade her good-bye at the door of the cab to which he consigned her.

"And do not I trust you?" was her answer, with a look that spoke volumes, rousing all the manly impulses of his nature, appealing to all the generous instincts of his heart.

She knew exactly how to manage him. As she drove away, Frank felt that to deceive this simple, confiding girl, who had placed herself so completely at his mercy, trusted so implicitly in his honour, would be, of all villainies, the blackest and most disgraceful. "If I'm going to make a fool of myself," he muttered, while the rattle of her cab was lost in the roar of an adjacent thoroughfare, "at least you shall never find out I think so; and, come what may, my darling, hang me if I'll ever be such a rogue as to make a fool of *you*!"

Miss Ross, returning to No. 40, experienced much the same feelings as a whist-player, who, with unexpectedly good cards, has yet made the most of them by science, skill, and studious attention to the game. Perhaps, also, she felt conscious of a certain fatigue and depression, such as generally succeed brain-work accompanied by excitement. During her *tête-à-tête* dinner with Mrs. Lascelles she was more silent than usual, whereas the other lady was more talkative. It did not escape the latter, however, that Jin's manner had acquired a softness and a wistful kindness towards herself she had never observed before. Uncle Joseph, too, coming to spend the evening, boiling with indignation, thought his ladye-love tenderer, more womanly, more attractive than ever. She had coaxed him into good-humour with his first cup of tea, and in less than ten minutes had him in perfect subjection once more. Whether it was compunction or remorse, or only the innate coquetry inseparable from the woman, I cannot explain, but a charm seemed to hang about

Jin to-night irresistible as the spells of a sorceress. Uncle Joseph, though the least sensitive of subjects, was completely subdued.

He took an early opportunity, however, of asking his enchantress, not without irritation, why she had been out when he called. Her answer disarmed him completely.

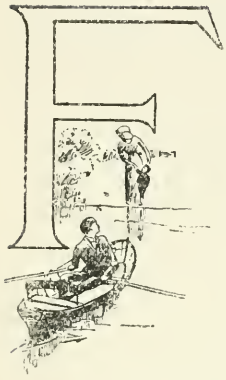
"I waited till past five, and then the pain got so much worse, I could bear it no longer."

His heart leaped and his eyes brightened. "You—you don't mean you couldn't endure the anxiety! Miss Ross!—Jin! How I wish I'd known! How I wish I'd seen you! What! You —you actually started to look for me?"

"Not so bad as that," she answered, with a smile; "I went out to get a tooth stopped."

CHAPTER XXII

KIDNAPPING



IRST for Windsor?—Second to Slough? which is it to be? I wish these young women knew their own minds!" muttered an irritated railway official at Paddington, as Miss Ross, changing her directions with inconvenient suddenness, blocked the stream of passengers defiling past his window to take their tickets for the train. She reinstated herself, however, in his good opinion, by unusual alacrity in paying her money, ere she entered the ladies' waiting-room, from which, after a couple of minutes, she reappeared, completely disguised in figure, face, and bearing.

She had gone in, a shapely, upright, good-looking young woman, on whom masculine eyes could not but turn with unqualified approval. She came out, wearing a double veil, a pair of blue spectacles, and a respirator, bent crooked, with one leg shorter than the other. Thus metamorphosed, she limped to her second-class carriage under the very noses of two men, to have been discovered by whom would have entailed ruin, disgrace, and instantaneous explosion of her grand scheme.

Picard and Frank, setting the bye-laws of the company at defiance by smoking on its platform, were making indiscreet remarks on the appearance of the different passengers hurrying to take their places in the same train. Little did they think how the heart was beating, of that dowdy, dumpy figure they glanced at half in pity, half in scorn; nor how a thrill of triumph pervaded her from top to toe, while Miss Ross reflected with what transparent devices these lords of the creation were to be duped, with what facility she could turn and twist two great stupid men round her dainty little finger. She did not so much mind Frank. Had he been alone, they might have journeyed amicably down together, but she dreaded recognition by his companion; above all, she dreaded that Picard might have the same object as herself, might be going out of town for the express purpose of visiting the child. Even in this case, however, she felt a proud confidence in her own powers of outwitting them all; conscious that, like an Indian amongst the rapids, she could steer to an inch, undismayed by any danger, however imminent, that did not actually overwhelm her barque, taking a keen wild pleasure in the very destruction she invited only to elude. Sitting opposite a motherly woman, with a basket, who sucked peppermint as a sailor turns his quid, she found herself almost wishing she had taken her place boldly in the next carriage, which a strong odour of tobacco-smoke bade her infer was occupied by two men, both of whom she had successively fancied she loved.

Their conversation would have interested her, no doubt. Having taken a great liking to Frank, ever since the opportune appearance of that champion on the night he was assailed, Picard

had confided to him the whole history of a certain attraction that drew him so often to Windsor, and was now deep in a dissertation on the trustworthiness of Mrs. Mole, and the endearing qualities of her charge.

"Such a little brick, Captain," said the Confederate officer, between the puffs of an enormous cigar. "Such quality, such gumption, such grit, I wouldn't have believed could be found in a child, not if you raised 'em by steam! To see the critter's face when he lifts the latch to let me in—he can just reach it, and very proud he is to be so tall. To hear him crow, and halloo, and sing 'Hail, Columbia!' 'God save the Queen,' 'Rule Britannia,' and 'Yankee Doodle'! He's got 'em all as ready as sharp-shooting, and as correct—as correct, as a barrel-organ! It's my belief that child is destined to be a great man, Captain. He's gifted with adaptability, sir, and is what we call capable. That old woman I've trusted with him seems honest as the day, and does her duty by the varmint well. Health, of course, at present is the first consideration; but you see, when he gets a little older, if I don't give that boy an education to fit him for any profession or position on earth — from stoker on this broad-gauge railway to President of the United States! that's what I call bringing up a child in the way it should go."

Frank tried to appear more interested than he really felt.

"Exactly," said he; "and so whichever way he goes afterwards, must be the right one. It's an excellent plan, no doubt; but, I confess, I shouldn't have thought of it myself."

"They understand the question of education better on the other side of the Atlantic," continued

Picard, in perfect good faith; "they go ahead there to some purpose in most things, but when they're working 'social science,' as they call it, the way they get the steam up is a caution! Well, I've concluded to take my own plan with the young one — I feel I've a right, for I couldn't love the boy better if he was my son ten times over. Ah! I sometimes think, Captain, I should have been a happier man if I had been a better one. Loafing is like smuggling, it don't pay in the long-run. A contraband cargo is an awful risk, and a very uncertain profit; and yet, I doubt if it's a good thing, either, for a man to marry too early in life."

"Premature, eh?" answered Frank, not much encouraged, while conscious of feeling unpleasantly nervous, as he approached alike the termination of his journey and his bachelorhood. "Of course—certainly—thanks—yes, I will have another cigar—it brings him up short, I take it—settles him, as you may say, once for all."

Picard laughed. "Women *un*settle a chap sometimes," said he, "and bring him up short enough too, for that matter. I've tried it every way, and I only know I've always been wrong; but I sometimes think I could do better if I'd another chance. That's an uncommon likely girl now, that Miss Hallaton, as they call her. I wonder if I could do any good in those diggings. You know the family well, Captain; what do you think?"

Frank could hardly conceal his annoyance, though it was sad to reflect that after all he had no right to be angry. Loyal enough still to revere the flag he had deserted, he answered somewhat stiffly—

"Sir Henry looks very high for his daughter; and I should think Miss Hallaton herself would be

more fastidious, more difficult to please, than most people."

Picard seemed in no way disconcerted. A life of adventure soon produces a habit of underrating difficulties, and a tendency to risk all for the chance of winning a part. I am not sure but that a spice of this kind of recklessness is appreciated by women, and that nothing venture, nothing have, is a maxim which holds good in love, quite as much as in other affairs of life.

"Oh! I could get on well enough with the old man," said he; "there's a freemasonry amongst fellows of his stamp and mine. I consider Sir Henry quite one of my own sort, and, indeed, I've sounded him. Well, perhaps I can hardly say *sounded* him on the subject, but hinted to him that he and I might do a smartish stroke of business if we put our money and our brains together, and played a little into each other's hands. It's the girl that beats *me*, Captain; that's where I'm at sea. She's got a high-handed way with her that I can't make head against at all, and I'm not easily dashed —far from it. The young woman's uneasy in herself, too. There's something on her mind. I saw it from the first. The best thing she can do, in my opinion, would be to marry some smart, likely young chap, who would take her abroad for a spell till her colour came back, and the nonsense was driven out of her head. I should like to be *him* uncommon! But I don't see my way."

There was much of bitter to Frank in this simple, confidential talk, dashed, nevertheless, with a something of sweet and subtle poison, that ought to have warned him he had no right to pledge himself to one woman while he could thus be affected by the mere name of another. Strange

to say, he felt that Picard now constituted a link between himself and that past life which after to-day must be put out of sight for ever, and he clung to the Confederate officer accordingly.

"You'll come to luncheon at the barracks, of course," said he, throwing the end of his cigar out at the window. "I must be there till five or six o'clock to parade my young horses for the colonel. Why he wants to see them to-day I don't know, considering he bought them all himself, and a very moderate lot they are. But, anyhow, *there* I shall be till five at the earliest."

"Luncheon," repeated Picard reflectively; "I don't care if I do. I'm generally peckish about two o'clock, and Britishers *do* dine unnaturally late. I'll go and see the boy first, come back to feed with you, and take a look at the young horses afterwards. How long, now, Captain, do you estimate that it takes to get a trooper fit for duty?"

"How long?" repeated the other, who could be eloquent on this congenial theme. "Why, two years at the very least. And even then half of them are not properly mouthed for common field movements, certainly not for parade. Why, I've seen a squadron of Austrian cuirassiers march off at a walk, every horse beginning like a foot soldier with his near leg, and I don't know why our cavalry should be worse drilled than theirs. One of my troop was actually run away with last year at a review, and I felt as much ashamed as if he had run away in action! No; what I want is to see more rides and fewer foot parades, the men less bothered, and the horses better broke."

"Well, you *do* take an unconscionable time over everything in this old, slow, and sure country," answered Picard. "Why, if we'd wanted two years,

or two months either, to get our cattle fit for service, none of Stuart's best things would have come off at all. In ten days, Captain, ten days at most, I'd every horse in my squadron as steady as a timepiece, and as handy as a cotton-picker. I wish I could have shown you Stonewall. I called him Stonewall after Jackson, you may be sure. A great, slapping chestnut, sixteen hands high, and up to carrying two hundred pounds weight. Before I'd ridden him a week he'd lift a glove like a retriever, and walk on his hind-legs like a poodle. I could tell you things of that horse that I'll defy you, or any man, to believe! I was riding him on the twenty-first of— Holloa! here we are at Slough. What a queer old woman, hobbling along the platform! Now, that's the sort of figure you wouldn't see from one end of the States to the other. Where do you suppose they raised her, and what do you think she is?"

"Somebody's aunt, I should say," answered Frank carelessly, hardly vouchsafing a glance, as the train moved on, and Miss Ross drew a long breath of relief to find herself safe and undiscovered at Slough Station, within a few miles of her boy.

She thought well, however, to retain her disguise for the present, feeling such confidence in its efficiency that she regretted the first impulse of panic when she saw Picard should have prompted her to alter her destination. She reflected that, had she gone on to Windsor, she could have made sure of his proceedings, while remaining herself unrecognised, and that it would have been simpler and less trouble to watch the hawk than the nest. She must hover round the latter now, and so baffle this bird of prey, even in the very neighbourhood of its quarry.

So Miss Ross, putting more deformity into her figure, more limp into her gait, shrouding herself

more sedulously in her veils, her spectacles, and her respirator, seized on a job-carriage she found unoccupied, and ordered its driver to proceed leisurely in the direction of the Lilies. She was glad to have half an hour's quiet, in which to think over her plans, undisturbed by the jingling of this unassuming conveyance, and felt her courage rising, her wits growing brighter, as the moments drew near to test the steadiness of the one and the quickness of the other.

It was a part of Jin's character, on which she prided herself not a little, that come what might she was always "equal to the occasion." As Picard said of her long ago, soon after that form of marriage which the woman believed to have been an imposition, and the man considered no more binding than any other contract it suited his convenience to dissolve, "she could dive deeper, and come up drier" than most people. Notwithstanding the desperate nature of the plunge she was now contemplating, Jin had no misgivings but that she would reappear on the surface with plumage unruffled and confidence unimpaired.

Dismissing her fly at the gate of the Lilies, thereby leaving its driver to suppose that she was an upper servant belonging to that establishment, she took the well-remembered path leading to Mrs. Mole's cottage, limping along at a very fair pace over the open meadows, but availing herself of every leafy copse and thick luxuriant hedge that might hide her from the eyes of chance observers. No Indian brave on the warpath could have been more cunning, more vigilant, more chary of leaving evidence where the trail had passed. At an angle of the road, within sight of the casket that held her jewel, an opportune hiding-place was formed by the intersection of two large strong fences, now tangled

and impervious in a wealth of foliage, briars, and wildflowers. Here, in a nook concealing her from any passenger who did not pass directly in her front, Miss Ross disposed herself to wait and watch. A Berkshire farmer, slouching by in a tumble-down gig, was the only person who disturbed her solitude ; and coming under his stolid gaze, she had presence of mind to pull a letter from her pocket and pretend to make a sketch. Watching his figure jogging drowsily down the road, she shrank back in her hiding-place, for Picard was lifting the latch of Mrs. Mole's garden gate, and a little voice, in shrill accents that made her pulses leap, was bidding him welcome to the cottage. Jin's whole faculties seemed to concentrate themselves in her large wild shining eyes.

Would he never go? Did he mean to stay there all day? She looked at her watch again and again, while every quarter of an hour seemed lengthened to a week. With hungry jealousy she pictured him in the brick-floored kitchen, lifting her curly-haired darling on his knee, robbing her of the kiss, the smile, the simple prattle, the little endearments. She experienced a fierce desire to rush in and rescue her child by force. "What right has he to come between me and my boy?" thought she, clenching her hands with impatience. "I can understand what they mean now, when they talk of the love a tigress bears for her cubs. Ah! *I* shouldn't have got tired of you so soon, my little pet," she added, with characteristic inconsistency, when the click of the front-door latch announced Picard's departure, and she saw him waving back a succession of farewells to the child.

He had remained with it really less than an hour. To Miss Ross the time seemed interminable, yet now it was over, she blamed him that his visit had been so short.

"He's growed, Miss, ain't he now?"

She forced herself to wait till he had been gone full ten minutes by her watch. Then, abandoning disguise, she scudded down the road, and with a hasty greeting to Mrs. Mole, caught Gustave in her arms and strained him to her breast, as if she feared he would be torn away from her on the spot. The little fellow seemed quite pleased to see her again, laying his curly head to her cheek, and crowing out those inarticulate murmurs of fondness which are so touching from the innocent affection of a child. Jin's eyes filled with tears, but she had to hide them from Mrs. Mole, who, congratulating herself on such good fortune as two opportunities for gossip in one day, was careful not to let the occasion pass away unimproved.

"He's growed, miss, ain't he now?" asked that good woman, in a tone pleasantly contrasting with the stiffness of her demeanour on Jin's first appearance at the cottage. "An' he's a-learning to be a good boy, as well as a big boy, ain't ye, Johnnie? Why, the gentleman said as he hardly knowed him again, if it wasn't for his curls. Strange enough, miss, the gentleman hadn't but just only left as you come in. An' Johnnie, he was wondering this morning in his little bed, when the dark lady was a-coming to see him again, and if she'd bring him a plaything. Ah! miss, there's greater sense in childer' than in grown-up folks—isn't there now? An' greater gratitude too—the more you make of 'em, the better they like you, but it's not so with men and women."

Abstaining from discussion on the question thus opened up, Miss Ross produced the toy she had bought the day before, and it is hard to say whether the women, old and young, or the child itself, seemed most delighted by the shouts of triumph with which

this acquisition was greeted. Gustave, or Johnnie, as Mrs. Mole called him, shook it, rung its bells, undressed it, and dressed it up again, idealising it in turn as a soldier, a clergyman, a butter-churn, and, till checked by his careful guardian, a hearth-broom, with unbounded satisfaction, renewed at each fresh metamorphosis. And so the afternoon wore away till it was time for Miss Ross to prefer a long-considered petition, that she might take the child out for a walk.

But here a difficulty presented itself: Johnnie had a slight cold; the evening was clouding over and threatened rain. It was only after a long and earnest pleading that Mrs. Mole gave her consent for one little turn as far as the river and back, while she busied herself about some household matters that were more easily set to rights in the absence of her charge.

With a beating heart Miss Ross led him down the pathway towards the river, the boy kicking out his feet and taking huge steps with his short legs in a state of high triumph and glee.

Presently, at the water's edge, he looked wistfully up in his companion's face and asked—

"Ain't we going back? Never going back—never—no more?"

"Would you like never to go back, darling?" said Jin, stooping to fold him in her arms.

"I want to go back to Moley!" answered Johnnie, now panicstricken, and making up his face for a cry.

Heavy drops of rain began to fall, and at the same moment a boat, shooting suddenly round a bend in the river, grated its keel on the shallows under the bank.

CHAPTER XXIII

"STRANGERS YET"

THE rower of this boat, whose back was necessarily turned to the shore, wore a pea-jacket, with its collar turned up to the brim of a black hat, such as is not usually affected by watermen, either professional or amateur. Through Jin's beating heart shot a sickening throb of misgiving and alarm. She turned cold and faint, catching up her boy and hugging him instinctively to her breast.

As the rower, obviously unused to an oarsman's exercise, rose, straightened himself, and turned round, he started with a violence that shot the boat back into deep water, her chain running out with a clang over her bows. Stupefied, as it seemed, by this apparition of the man whom she had watched from Mrs. Mole's door three hours ago, Jin's eyes dilated, her jaw dropped, while she gazed in Picard's face as if she had been turned to stone.

He was the first to recover himself, and burst into a laugh, not entirely forced.

"Who would ever have thought it?" said he, shoving the boat close in shore. "Of all reunions this is the most extraordinary, the most unlooked for. Jump in, madame, there is no time to lose; in ten minutes it will rain like a waterspout. Great

Heavens, you are unaltered after all these years, and you have not a grey hair in your head!"

She obeyed mechanically in silence, folding Gustave beneath her shawl, who protested with energy against the embarkation, expressing a strong desire to return to "Old Moley" forthwith.

Once more in mid-stream, Picard laid on his oar as if doubtful whether to proceed. "What are you doing with that boy?" he asked.

She had recovered her presence of mind, though still confused and bewildered, as after some stunning blow.

"You *know* me, Achille," said she, bending on him the defiant, impracticable gaze he remembered so well. "Whatever happens, wherever we are bound, the child goes with me! Where are you taking us? What is the meaning of it all?"

Picard's face was not improved by the diabolical expression that swept over it. "The meaning is this," he answered in a hoarse whisper, "I am helping Captain Vanguard to run away with my own— Bah!" he broke off abruptly, "there will be time enough for explanations between here and Windsor Bridge; the question is now about the child. He must not go a yard farther—he'll be wet to the skin as it is. There are few things I wouldn't part with to—to—undo the wrongs between you and me; but I cannot, and will not give up the boy!"

She would have been fiercer in all probability, but that Picard, accepting the heavy downpour, which now commenced, in his thin summer waistcoat and shirt-sleeves, had stripped off his jacket, and was wrapping the boy carefully in its folds, without, however, removing him from his mother's embrace. The little fellow smiled, and tugged

playfully at this rugged nurse's whiskers, obviously welcoming the face of a friend, but repeated his request to return to Old Moley as speedily as possible.

"I mean to have no discussions," said Jin, in tight, concentrated accents that denoted suppressed rage and inflexible resolution. "I never wished to see your face again, and I shall insist presently on knowing why you are here now; but in the meantime I desire to know what right you have to the child?"

"I like that!" exclaimed Picard, with a bitter laugh. "Rather, what right have you? I saved his life!"

"I gave him birth!" answered Jin collectedly. "This is the infant you deserted so gallantly and so generously when you left his mother. Enough! He has no claim on you, my precious; you belong solely and exclusively to me!"

Picard heeded not. Bending over that little bundle, folded so carefully in his pea-jacket, on its mother's knee, he kissed the soft brow tenderly, gently, almost reverently, while a tear hanging in the man's shaggy whiskers dropped on the pure delicate cheek of the child.

"No wonder I loved you," he muttered. "I wish I had been a better man, for your sake."

Miss Ross was touched. "*Allons!*" said she; "you and I may come to an understanding, after all. Speak the truth, and so will I. How did you find the boy, and where?"

Ashamed of his feelings, as such men usually are ashamed of any one redeeming point in a character saturated with evil, he had recovered his emotion, and was pulling leisurely down stream with the utmost composure.

"How and where?" he repeated. "Well, the story is simple enough, and there would be nothing extraordinary in it but for what I have this moment learned, I give you my honour, for the first time. I happened to be at Lyons in one of the worst floods they had there for twenty years. The river rose incredibly during the night, and I was out at daybreak to—to see the fun, you know, and render any assistance I could afford. In the top room of a cottage, completely undermined and tottering, I saw a woman making signals of distress. Between us lay what looked like a canal; it may have been a street once for all I know, but a few defaced walls, five or six feet above the water-level, were alone left. Excepting the half-fallen cottage from which this woman waved her arms, not a tenement was standing for some score of yards on each side. I was already immersed to my waist, but I had to swim for it before I could reach the poor creature, who seemed out of her wits with terror. Treading water a few feet below, I implored her to plunge in at once, and trust to me. I thought she was coming, when '*Tiens!*' she screamed out—I can hear her now—and threw, as I imagined, a linen bundle at my head. It fell beyond me, and sank immediately. I dived for it, and quickly too; but while I was under water the walls fell with a crash, and the whirl carried me several paces from where I had gone down, not, however, before I had succeeded in grasping the bundle, which I brought with me to the surface. As the rush subsided, I found the stream encumbered with dust, beams, household furniture, but of the woman I could see nothing. Doubtless at the instant, perhaps from the very effort she made to consign me her burthen, its foundations gave way, and she fell among the ruins

of her house, to be drowned without a chance of escape.

"The bundle contained a boy—living, unhurt, and very wet. I have taken care of him ever since. There he is. Do you think anything would tempt me to part from him now?"

The tears rose to Jin's eyes. "God bless you!" said she. "You saved my child!"

"I saved *our* child," he answered; "and I am not going to give him up."

"Why are you here to-day?" she asked. "And where do you mean to put me ashore?"

She was meditating, even then, how she might escape him; if to reach Frank Vanguard, well and good; but, at anyrate, to attain some refuge where she could be alone with her child.

He laughed, to cover a strong sense of embarrassment, even of shame.

"This is a strange *rencontre*," he said. "It must be Fate. You and I have never once met among all the amusements of a London season; and we meet now in the rain, on the lonely river, at a time when we ought most to forget and ignore each other's existence. Of all people in the world, I must be the last you would have wished to come across to-night."

"En effet," she muttered, "c'est une rencontre assez mal-à-propos."

Her coolness seemed contagious. He proceeded with a *sang-froid* too complete to be perfectly natural—

"I came here to oblige my dearest friend, a man for whom I would make almost any sacrifice. That foreign prince at Windsor has taken a sudden fancy to inspect a regiment of Household Cavalry in their barracks. He is there at this moment, attended by

every officer available for duty. My friend, Captain Vanguard, came to me in the greatest agitation. He had a rendezvous, he said, for this evening, with a lady. It could not be put off. It was of the gravest importance. If he failed to appear, she was lost. He reposed entire confidence in my honour. He asked my advice. What was to be done? I considered. I remembered my obligations to him. I put myself in his place. In short, here I am, in his place, pledged to conduct you safely to the Castle Hotel, there to wait till he is at leisure to join you, after which I am free to take whatever course I think due to my own character in this most awkward complication. I need not say that it never entered my head the Miss Ross I had heard of in society, or the lady whose *enlèvement* I was to conduct for my friend, could be—well—could be *you*! Madame, we have met in a manner that is creditable to neither of us—that is utterly ruinous to one. Can we not ignore this clumsy *contretemps*? Can we not agree to conceal it, and never meet again?"

Jin felt much reassured by this climax, though ready to sink with shame and vexation at the whole business.

"You know I am going to—to *marry* Captain Vanguard," she said, looking him straight in the face, though she hesitated a little in her sentence. "Will you promise to throw no impediment in my way—to keep your own counsel? In short, to let bygones be bygones, if, on my part, I consent to leave the past unscrutinised and unavenged?"

"It's a fair offer," he replied; "but I cannot give you up the boy."

"Then war to the knife!" she burst out recklessly. "I will lose husband, lover, home,

character, everything—life itself—rather than part with Gustave for a day!"

Perhaps he knew what a desperate woman was. Perhaps—for, in his own way, he too loved little Gustave very dearly—he reflected that a child might safely be committed to a mother's tenderness, even were that mother the wildest and most wilful of her sex. In a couple of minutes his busy brain formed a thousand schemes, took in a thousand contingencies. Frank Vanguard was about to marry the woman who had once held a wife's place at his hearth. Well, to that he had no objection. He would at least be freed from an awkward claim, which might interfere with certain vague schemes of his own that had only recently begun to take a shape. In those schemes Frank's assistance, as a friend of Sir Henry Hallaton's, might be valuable. An intimacy with Vanguard, and the latter's good word, would vouch at least for his position and standing in society. Helen could no longer consider him a mere unknown adventurer. Some influence he might obtain over Frank through his wife, if, indeed, this wild, untoward marriage were to come off. His chief difficulty lay in that wife's inflexible and impracticable character; but surely he could bend her to his will through her affection for the boy.

"You cannot take him with you now," observed Picard, in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone. "Think of the travelling, and the weather, and the ridicule attached to the whole proceeding. You are not going to join your future husband, surely, with a ready-made child?"

"I am!" she exclaimed in high indignation. "Frank knows all about it, and takes us as we are!"

"Then I may explain everything," said he, pulling on faster, as if satisfied. "It makes it much easier for me as regards my duty to my friend."

She saw her false position, and felt she was now at his mercy.

"Let us make a bargain," she said. "I would not injure you; I hope you would not injure me. I confess I have deceived Captain Vanguard in this matter. I told him about Gustave, but I said he was a sister's son. I cannot part with the child. I implore you to let me keep him! If you will consent so far, and abstain from crossing my path at this the turning-point of my whole life's happiness, I will swear, to absolve you, formally and in writing, from any claim I may have on your property or your personal freedom; and if ever I can be of service to you, or advance your career in any way, so help me Heaven, I will!"

Picard pondered. She had made the very proposal he would himself have broached; but he was too crafty to betray satisfaction, and, to do him justice, felt very loath to lose the child, none the less that he had now discovered it was his own. Yet he could not but reflect that so long as Gustave remained with her by his consent, he had the mother at a disadvantage, and could drive her which way he would. Frank Vanguard's domestic happiness would thus be at his mercy, and it was strange if, with consummate knowledge of the world, and utter freedom from scruples, he could not turn such a power to good account.

"Agreed," said he, as they shot past the Brocas clump, and caught sight of Windsor Castle, looming gigantic through a leaden atmosphere of mist and rain. "Agreed. We are strangers again from henceforth as regards Vanguard—as regards the

world. When we meet in society, that is to be clearly understood. But we are *not* strangers as regards our boy. Once a week you will write and tell me of his welfare. Once a month you will arrange that I shall see him, either with or without witnesses—I care not which. Stay! I have it. You shall tell Vanguard I am the father of your dead sister's child! Capital! I begin to think I have quite a genius for intrigue!"

"It is such a tissue of falsehood!" she groaned; "and Frank is so honest—so trustful!"

He ground his teeth; but forced himself to answer with unwavering accents and a smooth brow.

"I cannot enter into the sentiment of the thing. You know me of old. That is my ultimatum. Take it or leave it. I must run you ashore here, and I can show you the short cut to the hotel."

"Agreed!" she whispered, as he handed her along a quivering plank that let her reach the shore dry-shod. "Honour?"

"Even among thieves," he added, with a laugh; and thus was the contract ratified on both sides.

But short as was that by-way from the river to the Castle Hotel, heavily as the rain came down, enforcing the utmost attention to little Gustave,—a perishable article indeed, "to be kept dry, this side uppermost,"—and fractious as was the deportment of that inexperienced traveller, who, thoroughly bewildered with his situation, retained but the one idea of bewailing his lot aloud, while he held on manfully to the new toy, Jin found time to arrive at the noblest, the grandest, and the most important resolution she had ever made in her life.

It has always appeared to me there is one

infallible criterion of that rare and mysterious affection which goes by the name of true love. "How many dollars do you like her?" asked a Yankee of the friend who expatiated on his devotion to a beloved object; thus gauging, as he considered, that devotion by a standard at once unerring, and not to be misconceived. The friend, "estimating" that he "liked her a thousand dollars," proved himself ten times more to be depended on than his rival, who only "liked her a hundred"; and, in my opinion, there was much knowledge of human nature in this Yankee's mode of valuing an attachment. If you own but five dollars in the world, and you "love your love five dollars' worth," you are very much in love with her indeed, and have come triumphantly through that strongest test of sincerity which consists in self-sacrifice.

There must have been a spark of sacred fire under the lurid flame which Frank had kindled in her breast, or Miss Ross would have escaped a struggle that seemed to tear her heart in pieces during this short wet walk, with all its accompanying annoyances — that made her unconscious of heavy rain, draggled garments, and unwelcome company—that, but for a mother's instinct, would have caused her to forget the necessity of sheltering her boy.

She stole a glance—it was well he did not observe it—at the hated form of the man by her side, and all the masculine part of her nature rebelled in the remembrance of its former thraldom. The thought of Frank Vanguard's open brow, of his loving eyes, his manly, kindly smile, and feminine instincts of tender generosity, rose strong within her as she turned scornfully from the suggestion that he, her own, who had chosen her so nobly, so

chivalrously, should be at the mercy of such a man as Picard. "No!" thought Jin, walking on very fast, and hugging Gustave tighter than ever to her breast. "Better that I should never see him again, than fasten such a clog round his neck! Better that I should lose my one dear chance on earth, than ruin him, degrade him, drag him down to the level of such people as ourselves! I am not to be happy, it seems, in that way; but I have no right to complain since I have got my child. And yet, Frank, Frank, what will you think of me? You will never know the sacrifice I made for you! You will never know what it cost me! You will never know that I loved you better than my very life!"

While such thoughts were racking heart and brain, it was quite in accordance with Jin's character that her outward manner should be more than ordinarily composed and self-possessed. Arriving at the welcome shelter of the Castle Hotel, she desired a fire to be kindled immediately, and taking very little notice of Picard, busied herself with the child and its wet things. He was quiet enough now; but moaned at intervals as if uneasy in mind rather than in body; but it did not escape a mother's observation that the cheek he pressed against her own was hotter than usual, and though it made his dark eyes shine so beautifully, she would rather not have seen that brilliant colour so deep and strong. But it was a time for action, not for apprehension, and she turned to Picard with a quiet gesture of authority, such as she would have used towards a servant—

"Be so good as to ring the bell," she said, "and tell them to get some bread and milk for this little boy. Order tea in an hour, and then go to the barracks and tell Captain Vanguard I am

waiting here. I suppose I shall not see you again —good-bye."

He took the hand she held out, with something of admiration and respect.

"Well, you *are* a cool one!" he exclaimed. "I declare, you're cooler even than me! In a matter like this, where there's interest in one scale and feeling in the other, I think I can trust you as I would myself!"

She only nodded, resuming the occupation, from which she had turned for a moment, of drying her child's wet socks at the lately kindled fire. Picard caught the boy in his arms and smothered him with kisses; then replacing him in his mother's lap, took his departure without another word.

"Where's he going?" said Gustave, making a plunge, to land barefooted on the floor.

"He's going away, dear," answered Jin, much preoccupied, and scorching the socks against the bars of the grate. "And we're going away too. Don't you want to go away from this nasty room?"

"I want to go to Moley," answered the boy, in a sing-song that frequent repetition on the river had rendered mechanical. "And I want my tupper," he added, brightening up at so happy an afterthought.

But he couldn't eat his supper when it came; and now that his things were dry, Miss Ross was glad to hush him off to rest in her arms.

When he was sound asleep, she rang the bell gently. "I am going out for an hour," said she to the waiter. "If anybody calls, say that tea is ordered to be ready when I come back."

Then she walked away in the pouring rain, and beckoned a flyman from the stand.

"Drive to the Lilies," she said in a loud voice. "Shut those glasses, and make haste."

But as soon as they were clear of the town, she reversed her sailing orders, and directed the man to proceed to Staines.

Arriving at the station, she found by a time-table that an up-train was due in five minutes. "What do you charge for waiting?" asked Miss Ross, as the driver let her out.

The man informed and overcharged her.

"Then wait here for the down-train in an hour," said she, paying him liberally. "If you don't get a fare you can then drive back to Windsor; but I shall desire the station-master to see that you remain here on the chance."

So, hushing Gustave, who, considering he seemed so sleepy, was strangely restless, Miss Ross took her place in the train, to be whirled to town with the comfortable reflection that, till her fly returned to Windsor, in two hours' time, it would be impossible for Frank Vanguard to obtain any trace of her, while she herself would be in the labyrinth of London in forty minutes. She pulled the double veil from her pocket, and dropped it over her face, while she rocked the boy tenderly on her knee.

It was well for him to have this protection, for Gustave did not need another wetting, and his mother was crying as if her heart would break.

Thus it fell out that Frank, flying on the wings of love and a thoroughbred hack from his duty at the barracks to his affianced at the Castle Hotel, found nothing there but a black fire, an empty room, and a waiter's assurance that "the lady would be back in less than half an hour. She'd been gone longer nor that already."

Picard, of course, having fulfilled his mission, considered himself absolved from further attendance, and Frank had nothing more to do but walk up and down the cheerless apartment, fussing, fuming, wondering, and, I fear, at times unable to restrain an oath. The rain fell, the evening waned, the twilight turned to dark, and at length the waiter came in with candles, and asked "if he should bring in tea?"

Then Frank could stand it no longer, but rushed wildly out to make inquiries, invoking a hideous and totally undeserved fate on the waiter and the tea.

CHAPTER XXIV

GREENWICH

BUT Captain Vanguard was not the only person whom the inexplicable disappearance of Miss Ross overwhelmed with consternation and dismay. Picard, whom, of course, he consulted first, affected to treat the matter lightly, vowing there must have been some misconception of directions, some misunderstanding about the time, while in his heart he cursed the invincible wilfulness, the inflexible obstinacy that, he knew of old, would dare and endure anything rather than give way. He did his best, we may be sure, to help his friend in hunting down the woman who had outwitted him; but the track of a fugitive is soon lost in London, and, with all his craft, Picard's best was done in vain. For Vanguard, he considered this disappointment the luckiest thing that could happen. For his own part, he never wanted to see Miss Ross again; but it was a sharp, keen pang, to think that every tie must now be cut off between himself and his boy. Even Jin would have pitied him, had she known how he suffered under this privation.

Poor old Mrs. Mole, too, nearly went distracted with alarm, anxiety, and remorse. After running in and out of her cottage all the evening, till, to use her own expression, "she hadn't a dry thread any-

wheres, an' the damp had fixed itself in her bones," she started off at dark to take counsel of the parish clerk, the turnpike-man, and a neighbouring cow-doctor; from none of whom, as may be supposed, did she gather much counsel or comfort. The clerk was "sure as the lad would be back afore mornin'"; the turnpike-man opined "he'd runned away for aggravation; and if 'twas his'n, *he'd* soon let him know not to try them games no more"; while the cow-doctor, not exactly sober, opined "he'd fell in o' the water, and drownded hisself, poor thing! and now the little varmint's gone to heaven, mayhap, and don't want to come back here no more."

The poor old woman, returning home from this futile expedition to see Johnnie's little bed spread out, smooth and untumbled, as if waiting for the child, burst into a fit of crying, and sat all night through by the waning fire, with her apron thrown over her head.

On Uncle Joseph's feelings, when, calling at No. 40, he learned that Miss Ross had left her home without stating where she was going, or when she would return, I cannot take upon me to expatiate. Displeasure, perhaps, was the strongest sensation that affected him, but a fit of the gout arriving at this juncture to divert his attention from mental worry to bodily pain, he got through the ordeal altogether better than might have been expected.

Mrs. Lascelles, however, grew seriously alarmed and distressed, when the lapse of a second day brought no tidings of her inseparable companion and fast friend. She reproached herself bitterly for taking Jin to task about her conduct with Captain Vanguard. She contrasted her own comfortable home, all the luxuries that surrounded her, with a

mental picture she chose to draw of Miss Ross, starving, in proud silence, on cold mutton, somewhere in a "second-floor back," and felt painfully humiliated in the comparison. Then she wondered if it would be possible to track her by means of detectives, advertisements, Pollaky's private inquiry office, or a heartrending appeal in the agony column of the *Times*. Finally, womanlike, feeling she must have somebody to lean on, she bethought her of Goldthred, and wrote him a pretty little note, marked "Immediate," desiring him to come and see her without delay. Why not Sir Henry? Mrs. Lascelles asked herself that question more than once; and, while searching her heart for the answer, made a discovery which by no means increased her respect for her own stability in sentiment or discrimination of character.

"Sir Henry would laugh," she thought, "and murmur some cynical remarks, half good-natured, half contemptuous, on women's friendships and women's fancies. He would help me, I have no doubt, and very likely, if he could find Miss Ross, might make love to her on his own account, but he would not take the matter up as if it was life and death to him, like Mr. Goldthred. I do declare, if I asked that man to get me a China rose, he'd go to China for it rather than I should be disappointed. It must be very nice to believe in anybody as he believes in me. If I was only as good as he thinks I am! I wish I was! I wonder if I should be, supposing—supposing— Well, the first thing is to find out poor dear Jin, and implore her to come back, if I have to go for her on my bare knees!"

So her letter was written and posted, Mrs. Lascelles never doubting that the recipient would answer it in person ere three hours had elapsed.

But when the clock struck again and again, when luncheon passed without his appearance, and the summer afternoon waned, bringing no Mr. Goldthred, Mrs. Lascelles could not decide whether she felt most hurt, vexed, angry, disappointed, or distressed.

No doubt, if he had known such a letter was coming, he would have ignored other business without scruple, and remained at home to receive it all day; but Goldthred had left his own house for the City directly after breakfast, having no intention of returning to dress for dinner, because he had cut out for himself some fifteen hours' work that he must get through in less than twelve.

Of this task, the hardest part, in his estimation, was the entertainment of a large and rather *loud* party he had invited to dine with him at Greenwich. From these friends he felt there would be no escape till eleven o'clock at night.

It will be remembered that Goldthred, in an hour of exuberant feeling, had tried to organise a picnic, which unfortunately fell through from the inability to attend of those he was most anxious to invite. In such cases, however, some responsibility is almost always incurred by the adhesion of a few less important guests, who must nevertheless be provided with food and amusement, though the others are unable to come.

For Goldthred, indeed, there was no difficulty in substituting with these makeweights a Greenwich dinner-party for a Maidenhead picnic. Stray men were soon recruited to fill up the necessary complement. Failing ladies of higher calibre, Mrs. Battersea and Kate Cremorne were persuaded to enliven the gathering with their beauty, their dresses, and their mirth. Picard, who was glad of any scheme

to take him away from Frank Vanguard, in that officer's present state of perturbation, agreed to drive them all down on his coach; and thus it fell out that Goldthred, with his heart rather sore about Mrs. Lascelles, little dreaming a letter from her was at that moment lying on his table, found himself sitting, in a glare of sunshine, by an open window overlooking the river, between Mrs. Battersea and Kate Cremorne.

Two or three hot waiters were bringing in as many dishes, with imposing covers, that would have served for a burlesque feast in a pantomime. Shawls, fans, hats, parasols and overcoats lay scattered about the room; men lounged and straddled in uncomfortable attitudes, as not knowing how to dispose of their limbs and persons; a confusion of many tongues prevailed; and above the babble rose Mrs. Battersea's voice, clear, shrill, and dominant, like the steam-whistle of a railway through the puffing diapason of the engine and continuous roar of the advancing train.

"I vote against waiting," dictated that imperious lady, when the probability was hazarded of a fresh batch of guests arriving later. "Never wait dinner for anybody, particularly at Greenwich. Now, Mr. Goldthred, don't be shy; take the top of the table. I'll sit by you here. Kate, support him on the other side. Sir Henry, come next me. I won't have you by Kate. I know what you are going to say—you'd rather be close to me, and have her to look at. I'm so tired of those old compliments. I wish men would find out something new! *Rangez vous, messieurs! Le jeu est fait. Rien n'va plus!*"

"Rouge gagne, et couleur," whispered Sir Henry Hallaton, with a glance at Mrs. Battersea's brilliant complexion and toilet to match, accompanied by a

jerk of his elbow in his next neighbour's ribs. The latter, who had never been to Baden or Homburg, and whose French was that of Stratford-atte-Bow, did not the least understand, so laughed heartily, and Sir Henry set him down in his own mind as a pleasant young fellow, with a great idea of fun. The baronet had turned up at this gathering, as he generally did turn up wherever gaiety and absence of restraint were likely to prevail. Notwithstanding his better reason and his good resolutions, he was fast drifting down the stream of easy self-indulgence, which sooner or later carries a man so helplessly out to sea.

He had now struck up a close alliance with Picard, whereby that scheming adventurer hoped he might win his way into Helen's good graces, and so attain a certain standing-point in society, from which to push his fortunes with a daring energy that ought to command success. Sir Henry could not, or would not, see the false position in which he placed himself by affecting such terms of intimacy with such a man.

The dinner was good enough, and to Goldthred seemed almost interminable, although exerting himself to do his duty towards his guests; he reaped a reward by gradually sliding into amusement in their conversation, and before the devilled whitebait came on, began even to interest himself in their society. The latter sentiment was due to the good feeling of Miss Cremorne, who, guessing her host was somewhat overweighted by his company, and altogether depressed in spirits, exerted herself very successfully to cheer him up, and bring him, as she expressed it, "out of the downs."

Kate did not miscalculate her own powers; indeed few men could have long resisted her low

pleasant tones, kindly glances, and soft, sympathising manner; for notwithstanding high spirits, high courage, high temper, and sometimes high words, she could be gentle on occasion, and when Kate *was* gentle, she became simply irresistible.

Neglecting a dandy on her right, who accepted that calamity with the utmost philosophy, she devoted herself to Goldthred, till they grew so confidential that when dinner was over he brought his coffee-cup and cigar to a little corner she had purposely reserved by her side on the balcony. She was so unused to shyness amongst men, there was something so different from all her previous experience of his sex in Goldthred's simple, honest nature, homely though courteous manner, and utter absence of pretension, that she positively felt interested in him, and Miss Cremorne was the last young person in the world to be ashamed of the sentiment, or afraid to exhibit it.

"Why don't you offer me a cigar?" said she, with a killing glance that would have finished any other man in the room on the spot.

"You shall have a dozen," he answered, pulling out a well-filled case in some confusion. "I really didn't know you smoked."

"No more I do," she replied, laughing, "except sometimes a very tiny cigarette. "No; I don't want one now; but that's no reason you shouldn't offer it. Don't you know, Mr. Goldthred, that with ladies you should always take the initiative?"

"It's so difficult," he answered doubtfully, sliding into the corner by her side. "One is never sure how far one ought to go, and I have the greatest horror of being a bore."

"There you're wrong," decided Kate;— "women like bores. For the matter of that, so

does everybody. Who are the people that get on in society? Bores. Who manage your clubs, your race-meetings, your amusements? Bores. Who make the best marriages, keep the best houses, and insist on having all the pleasant people to dance attendance on them? Bores—bores—bores! They are in the majority, they have the upper hand and they mean to keep it. Shall I tell you why? A bore is always in earnest; the more in earnest the greater bore! Have I made out my case?"

"At least you have given me a claim to bore you," said Goldthred, laughing.

"And without being in earnest," she replied; "though I think you could be very much in earnest with some people. That's why I'm interested in you. That's why I'm going to give you a piece of advice. There is an English proverb I need not repeat about 'a faint heart.' There is a French one more to the purpose, I think, in your case, *Il faut se faire valoir.* Now, you mustn't flirt with me any longer. You'll hear of it again if you do, and two of my admirers are looking as black as thunder already. Go and circulate among your guests, but don't forget my advice, and good luck to you!"

Il faut se faire valoir. The words rang in his ears all the evening—through the bustle of breaking up, the noisy departure, the chatter, and clatter, and hurry of the drive back to London—the very wheels seemed to tell it over and over in monotonous refrain, and ere Goldthred was set down at his own door, this sentence and its meaning seemed indelibly impressed on his brain.

Passing through the sitting-room, he found a letter in the well-known handwriting lying on his

table, and although a thrill went through every nerve in his body, I think even then Kate's advice was beginning to bear fruit. On reading the epistle, no doubt, there came a reaction, and his first impulse was to rush at once to No. 40, notwithstanding the hour, the occasion, and the proprieties; his second to write an answer then and there, expressing love, worship, and devotion with an eloquence none the less burning from the convivialities of a Greenwich dinner-party; his third, and wisest, to let everything stand over till to-morrow. And then, while he assisted her to the best of his abilities, to teach his scornful lady, quietly but distinctly, that he had learnt by heart this new maxim—*Il faut se faire valoir!*

CHAPTER XXV

HOW THEY MISSED HER

SO the London season drew towards its close, speeding merrily for some, dragging wearily for others, wearing on surely for all. It produced its usual crop of marriages, jiltings, slanders, and other embarrassments, but throughout the little circle of individuals with whom we are concerned at present, the engrossing topic was still that mysterious disappearance of Miss Ross. No stone had been left unturned to find her out, and yet, so well did she take her measures, not a trace could be discovered. Two people, indeed, received tidings of the fugitive, but on each her letters impressed the hopelessness of a search, and the writer's determination to remain henceforth in complete seclusion. To Mrs. Mole, Miss Ross sent a long and consolatory epistle, containing earnest assurance of the boy's safety, and an account of his sayings and doings, not forgetting many messages to "his old Moley," which would have gladdened her heart exceedingly but for the one drawback, that the little fellow lay ill with a feverish cold, and did not get stronger so fast as could be wished. To Frank

Vanguard she wrote a few short lines, telling him she was not fit to be his wife—the only good deed she had ever done in her life, she said, was that which seemed to him the most cruel, the most perfidious; and all endeavours to hunt her out would not only be sheer waste of time, but also considered so many insults and injuries directed against herself. Though it did not entirely suspend his exertions, Frank's zeal was somewhat damped by this communication, which he lost no time in imparting to the circle of friends whom Jin had left overwhelmed with anxiety on her behalf. Uncle Joseph's gout, converging favourably to the extremities, gave him little time to think of anybody but himself. It took him to Buxton, where the successive duties of drinking, driving, dressing, bathing, and dining at five o'clock, left not a moment of the day unoccupied, and where the constant contemplation of greater sufferers and more hopeless cripples afforded moral lessons every five minutes, tending to content and thankfulness that he was no worse.

Mrs. Lascelles did, indeed, get hold of some idle tale about Uncle Joseph's attentions to a fascinating widow, also gouty, and of a brisk flirtation carried on by the enamoured couple, each in a Bath chair. Her informant stated, with what degree of truth I cannot take upon me to affirm, that this promising affair only exploded from the indiscretion of Mr. Groves, who, possessing himself of the lady's hand in the warmth of his protestations, unadvisedly seized the gouty one, and inflicted such pain that she called out loudly before the whole Parade. But as this piece of tittle-tattle was related to his kinswoman by a lady, who heard it from another lady, who had seen it in the letter of a third, I submit it is not evidence,

neither has it anything to do with the present history. On Mrs. Lascelles herself the disappearance of so firm a friend and confederate produced an effect that rendered her more than usually open to sympathy, and eager for consolation. She felt less confidence than heretofore in herself and her own resources. Solitude was bad enough, and doubly dispiriting after the society of so lively a companion, but the sense of having been deceived with her eyes open was worse than all. Occasional twinges of remorse, too, tormented her sadly, reminding her that she had spoken out so freely to one whom she ought to have been very careful of offending as dependent on herself. Of course, too, she put off her trip to Brighton; and her London engagement-book, originally compiled by Jin, naturally got into confusion when deprived of that lady's supervision. Altogether, Mrs. Lascelles felt keenly the want of somebody to lean on, and caught herself more than once thinking of her loneliness and her staunch admirer, Mr. Goldthred, with tears in her eyes!

Notwithstanding his confidence in Kate Cremorne's knowledge of the world, I doubt whether this gentleman would have possessed strength of mind to follow her advice had he been a free agent at the present crisis; but it so happened that some trustee-business with which he was mixed up, required his personal supervision at the other end of England, and Goldthred, *nolens volens*, was forced to absent himself temporarily from her vicinity, who made all the sunshine, and, it must be confessed, most of the shade, in his harmless, uneventful life. Nothing could be more opportune than this enforced separation for furtherance of the object on which, no doubt, his whole heart was fixed. Judicious contrast seems in all art the secret of effect.

Surprise, which has been called the essence of wit, is also the prime element of interest. Gentleness from a rough, firmness from an effeminate nature, constancy where we had reason to expect change, but, above all, self-assertion from the slave too long incarcerated and kept down, rouse us, as it were, to a sense of our own short-sightedness in matters that most affect our welfare, and warn us that in the affections, as in other affairs of humanity, there is no solid foundation, no security, no repose. Then we begin to value this bird, whose wings are grown, and spread already for a flight. Let her but soar away to disappear in the dim horizon, and all the gold of Arabia seems inadequate to bring her back into the cage once more. Alas! that the lightest feather from her wing should be more precious now we have lost her than was the whole of that gentle, winsome creature when she made her nest in our bosom, and pecked the sugar from our lips, and perched daily in saucy security on her owner's loving hand. Could Goldthred, closeted with lawyers and perusing deeds in a murky manufacturing town, have appeared suddenly before the woman who was never five minutes out of his mind, and asked in waking reality the question he was always asking in his dreams, I think he might have made himself secure, once for all, from the rivalry even of Sir Henry Hallaton.

That easy-going gentleman, notwithstanding his philosophy, his good-humour, and the elastic nature of his conscience, was at present exceedingly pre-occupied and ill at ease. One may say that he had been dipped overhead in the infernal river, as was Achilles; but like the son of Peleus, and every other hero I ever heard of, he retained his one vulnerable point, though it did not lie at his heel. To hit Sir

Henry in a vital place it was necessary to aim at Helen. Alas! that the bow had not been drawn at random, nor had the arrow missed its mark!

She was composed as usual, and went about her daily occupation with the same calm manner, the same gentle methodical firmness as before, but to her father's loving eye there was something wanting, something amiss. As a practised musician detects the flat tones of an instrument not strung to concert-pitch, so the slightest discord jars on the senses of that true affection which renders all the perceptions painfully discerning and acute.

"You are not well, my child," said Sir Henry, one hot summer's morning soon after the mysterious disappearance of Miss Ross, which Helen connected instinctively with Captain Vanguard, though too proud to inquire how far that injudicious young officer was concerned in such a catastrophe. "You are not well, dear, and you hide it for fear of making your old father uncomfortable. You don't go out enough, or it's this cursed weather, or something. We must amuse you, my darling. You're getting hipped. I'm the same myself sometimes. Did you go to the opera last night, after all?"

"No, papa," was the answer; "I was too tired, and went to bed instead."

"Did you drive out yesterday? I met your aunt coming here to take you."

"No, papa—it was so hot."

"What are you going to do to-day?"

"Nothing, papa. I think"—

"Helen, Helen, this will never do," burst out Sir Henry, smoothing her hair with a caress habitual to him from her childhood, a caress that brought the tears into her large soft eyes. "You're moped, you're miserable, and I feel as if it was my fault for

being papa instead of mamma. It *must* be dull for you, boxed up here, dependent on your aunt to get over the threshold, and she always was the most unpunctual person in the world except myself. Why don't you tell *me* when you want to go anywhere? I'd give up every engagement, as you know. Let's do something after luncheon. The Botanical Gardens—the Ancient Masters—even the South Kensington Museum! There, I'm game for anything you like!"

She could not help smiling, but it was a sad, wan smile, while she replied—

"You're very good, dear, and I'm a spoiled girl, I know; but, indeed, I'd rather stay at home, and so I'm sure would you."

"What have you settled about the concert to-morrow?" asked her father.

"Sent an excuse."

He pondered for a moment, and an expression of considerable annoyance crossed his face.

"I must get you out of town, Helen," said he. "The worst of it is I can't leave London myself just now—at least, for more than a day. If I could, we'd go abroad. Paris is empty and hot; but we might get into Normandy, have a week at Trouville, and come back by Dieppe. Would you like that?"

"No, papa," she answered decidedly; but added, with hesitation, "If you could do without me, what I should like best would be to—to go back to Blackgrove at once."

"My *dear* Helen!" was all his astonishment allowed him to articulate. That a daughter of his should prefer the country to London, during the height of the season, seemed simply inexplicable.

"My *dear* papa!" repeated Helen, with another of those sad smiles. "I'll go to-morrow if you

don't want me here. I wish I'd never come to London at all. The girls are so neglected when I'm away, and now we've no governess they get into all sorts of wild ways. I don't think they ought to be left so entirely to the servants. Lily writes me that she is up at five every morning to milk the cows. There's no harm in milking cows, but I think she would be better in bed, or learning her lessons. Indeed, papa, I should be much happier at Blackgrove than here. What do you think?"

What did he think? To a deeper mind than his it might have suggested itself that this yearning after home denoted some grievous injury, like that of a wounded animal making for its lair to lie down and die; but he took altogether a more practical and less romantic view of the case, attributing Helen's indisposition to stomach rather than heart.

"If you really wish it," said he. "Perhaps you are right. Early hours, in country air, will soon set you up again, and, of course, it's a great thing for the girls to have you with them. What a trouble they are, to be sure!"

Sir Henry always called his eldest "my daughter," his other female children "the girls," and his boy "the young one," as if the latter were a two-year-old, just about to be broke.

"Then I may go to-morrow?" exclaimed Helen, almost joyfully.

"Certainly, my dear," was the answer. "I'll take you down myself, sleep at Blackgrove, and come back next day by an afternoon train. I wish I could stay with you, but I can't."

"Of course it would be very nice for me," responded Miss Helen dutifully. "But you're not so much wanted, you know, when I'm there. While we're both away, things do get dreadfully

'to wrongs.' Oh, papa! I should like to go back and never leave Blackgrove again!"

With this domestic sentiment, much to his distress, astonishment, and even alarm, she hid her face in his breast, and began to cry heartily, emerging in a minute or so with a poor pretence of laughter, and an excuse that the hot weather was too much for her; as if a grown woman, with sound common sense and unusual self-command, ever cried because she was too hot. Sir Henry felt extremely uneasy. His varied experience of her sex had no doubt accustomed him to these ebullitions, but he had got into the habit of considering Helen superior to the rest, and it discomfited him sadly to find that she, too, could be weak, nervous, and, as he firmly believed, unhappy without a cause. He tried hard to persuade her to go to the French play that night, but Helen, wisely enough in my opinion considering the temperature, resisted firmly, and retired at ten o'clock.

Probably never in his life, except in a case of illness, had her father gone to bed before midnight. Lighting a cigar, he walked into the street and reflected which of his haunts he should visit to get rid of a couple of hours and shake off this feeling of anxiety and depression that had come over him about his daughter.

He was too preoccupied for whist, and, truth to tell, even in his brightest moments, looked on that noble pastime as a study rather than a recreation. So he sauntered to St. James's Street, and in one club after another sought the distraction he required in vain. There were men enough in each, but all seemed engrossed with their own interests, their own affairs; greeting him, indeed, with the utmost courtesy, but volunteering no confidences, and invit-

ing none in return. Most of them were younger than himself, and of his few contemporaries, one was lame from gout, another crippled with rheumatism, while a third volunteered the disheartening opinion that "it was time for fellows of our standing, my boy, to be in bed," rolling off while he thus delivered himself, with a hoarse, asthmatic, and unfeeling laugh. Sir Henry emerged on the pavement and shook his head.

"It's no use disguising it," he confided to his cigar; "I conclude I'm getting old, and the young ones are much more civil than they used to be, but not half so cordial. I liked them best when they slapped one on the back, asked one for a weed, and took all sorts of liberties. I suppose I must be an old fellow now, because nobody ever calls me one. It's 'Thank you, Sir Henry'—'With your permission, Sir Henry'—'Don't sit in the draught, Sir Henry'; and two years ago, they began to put me in the middle of the line partridge shooting, and to offer me a pony when the others walked the stubbles in the afternoon. I'm afraid I shall never hear a fellow say, 'Now then, Hal! look alive, my boy!' again. If it's really come, there's no use in fighting against it. I've a great mind to give the whole thing up, and subside at once into an old fogey. I would, if it wasn't for Mrs. Lascelles—there's something taking about that woman, every now and then, she might almost make a fool of me still—I like her so the days she doesn't like me—the days she does, I don't care about her; so, after all, what's the use? But she's fond of Helen. So was that other little black-eyed devil, Miss Ross. I wonder what has become of her; I wish I could find out. Everybody's fond of Helen. Ah! none of them are like her. If I could but see her thoroughly well and in

good spirits again, I shouldn't care for these cursed money matters nor anything else. This place seems full enough. May as well go in."

Thus ruminating on his daughter, Sir Henry's feet had carried him almost unconsciously to the door of Pratt's, which popular resort was indeed crowded to overflowing, so that several members had established a merry and somewhat noisy conclave in the street.

Amongst these Picard was holding forth loudly, dispensing as usual his excellent cigars with the utmost liberality. Catching sight of Sir Henry, he detached himself from the circle, and taking the baronet by the arm, walked him back a few steps into St. James's Street.

"I came here on purpose to find you," said he, "and I wondered you were so late. I've good news! glorious news! Our shares are down again! I was in the City all day!"

Sir Henry swore, not loud but deep.

"Good news!" he answered. "I wonder what you'd call bad!"

"Good news," repeated Picard. "Buy more—go into it up to your neck. I'm dipped overhead. Listen, Sir Henry, this is a real good thing—there's not another man in London I would put on but yourself; I'd private information from the other side last week. When the mail comes in, these Colorados will run up fifty, ay, seventy per cent.! Don't waste a moment, but grab all you can. It will set me on my legs, and I won't lose my footing again in a hurry, not if I know it! Shall you be at home to-morrow about luncheon time?"

"To-morrow?" said the other absently. "Not to-morrow. Must be at Blackgrove to-morrow—the next day certainly."

"Miss Hallaton is quite well, I hope?" continued Picard, lifting his hat as if she were actually present.

"Quite well, thank you," answered Sir Henry, wishing him good-night; but he was engrossed with his Colorados, and did not think of telling Picard that his daughter was going out of town.

CHAPTER XXVI

IN SAMARIA

THE season, I have said, was wearing on, and, with waning summer, the heat increased to an intensity almost tropical. There are few parts of Europe where the atmosphere can be more suffocating than in London during dog-days, although while everybody goes about gasping, fainting, bewailing the temperature, nobody seems to dream of putting off ball, drum, dinner, or other festive gathering to a cooler date.

The July sun glared pitilessly down on square, street, and crescent, to be refracted with tenfold power from walls and pavements; the Park was a burnished waste, Mayfair an oven, and Belgravia a furnace. Cabmen plied in their shirt-sleeves, foot passengers put up their umbrellas, the water-carts disappeared altogether, and supply for once seemed inadequate to demand in the matter of beer.

If people drooped and languished in spacious drawing-rooms, with sun-blinds, thorough draughts, fans, and all other appliances against the heat, what must that numerous class of our fellow-citizens have felt who live in stifling lodgings, stewing parlours over the kitchen and almost in the street, retired two-pair backs with eighteen inches of window, dusty carpets, heavy bed-furniture, and utter hope-

lessness of ventilation unaccompanied by showers of soot?

It is two o'clock in the day, the dinner-beer has been taken in and consumed, bare-armed artisans with short black pipes smoked out are leaning and loitering at doorsteps and window-ledge, doubtful whether to make holiday for the rest of the afternoon. A distant hum of children, like the drone of insects in a flower-garden, pervades the quarter,—for the energy of childhood is irrepressible by atmospheric influences,—but their hard-worked mothers are snatching a brief repose, and for a space even their tongues are still. An omnibus has stopped at the corner public-house while the horses are watered, a costermonger is fast asleep in his barrow by the roadside, and a drowsy, dreary torpor seems to pervade one of those narrow, tortuous streets that wind in an easterly direction from the Marlborough Road, S.W.

In the second floor of a shabby little house, a window stands as wide open as it can be propped by a bit of wood, and from that window, with a weary sigh, speaking volumes of patience, suffering, and sorrow, turns Miss Ross, to take her seat once more by the side of a low sofa-bed, and watch a toss of black curls, a little wan, pinched face, with a dull aching pain about her heart, that grows and strengthens as hope fades, and dies out, day by day. Poor Jin's own face has turned very white and thin too. Her features are sharpened, and the black eyes seem large, out of all proportion; yet never in the days gone by, when they flashed with coquetry, or sparkled with wit, did they possess so rare a charm, as the soft and tender lustre that shines in them now.

"It's cooler, dear, isn't it?" said she, pushing

those dark curls off the pale little brow. "And mamma wasn't going to leave her pet—was she? Did Gustave think mamma could fly out at the window?" She tried to speak lightly, anything to woo a smile from the sick child, but he only replied by turning pettishly away, and burrowing his face in the pillow, while he murmured, "Not leave Johnnie—Johnnie wants his shoes—wants to be dressed and taken away." As he got weaker, he resisted and entirely repudiated the name of Gustave, and although he had nearly forgotten Mrs. Mole, would only acknowledge his own identity as the "Johnnie" who had been so christened in the cottage by the riverside.

The boy caught cold on that eventful evening when Miss Ross carried him off, and had never regained strength. The cold turned to low fever, and hour by hour, in those long broiling summer days, he seemed to get gradually but surely weaker. He was fractious, though naturally sweet-tempered, restless without being in pain; there seemed no tangible organic malady, such as could be watched, fought against, overcome, but he drooped like a flower, and so drooping, well-nigh broke his mother's heart.

She never forgave herself that the child had been exposed to rain on the evening she took him away. Arriving in London, she at once sought this obscure locality, renting, indeed, the best rooms in the house, and sparing no expense for the comfort and convenience of her boy. By degrees, in addition to fears for his life, she had to face the anxiety of a waning purse, and the terrible consideration of what was to become of them both when her money was gone. The most skilful doctor in the neighbourhood was called in at a guinea a visit;

very often he wouldn't take his guinea; very often there would have been none forthcoming had he wanted it. For a time they lived on Jin's wardrobe, her watch, her jewels; by degrees the sources of supply began to fail. Then she moved herself and her boy upstairs. First, she had the whole second floor, then she gave up the other room, and, inhabiting one small apartment with her sick child, devoted to him her time, her energies, her whole existence, as she often thought, with sad, cold forebodings, in vain.

She starved, she pinched, she denied herself every luxury, almost every necessary, of life; but she never regretted what she had done, and she never lost courage.

"If Gustave gets well," she used to think, "I can work for him and me as I did before. If I can only struggle on till then, how happy I shall be. I shall have saved my boy. How could he but have been ruined under the care of that bad man? I shall have saved myself, for it is this poor patient angel who makes me good. And Frank, dear Frank! I shall have saved *you*!—you whom I loved better than myself! Ah! I have done well by you, and you will never know it. *Qu'est que ça fait?* It is finished, and there's an end of it. If my darling dies, what signifies anything? I shall soon die too! They will surely let me keep him in the next world. I who have had so little of him in this!"

Like the rest of us, she made for herself a future, all the brighter, no doubt, that the present seemed so cheerless and forlorn.

If the boy could only get well before her money was spent, if there was only enough left to defray the journey, she would carry him off with her to

sunny France, there to live the old life, amongst the old scenes in the old familiar way.

Her voice was still fresh, clear, and more powerful than ever; she need not surely seek long for an engagement, and under a false name, in those great southern towns, how was she to be traced or identified? She might defy Picard, she might even baffle the inquiries of Frank Vanguard, if, indeed, he loved her well enough to try and seek her out. The tears would come thick to her eyes while she pictured his sorrow and anxiety on her behalf, but she never wavered in her determination of keeping up an eternal barrier between them, and of devoting her whole existence henceforth to her child. Had she known how Frank accepted her loss with an uncomplaining resignation, very far short of despair, waking up, as it were, from a dream, with a feeling that, after all, things might have been worse, it is possible she would have shown less resolution; but believing him to be inconsolable, she felt herself impracticable and pitiless as adamant. Who shall say how far such dreams helped her to bear the nursing, the watching, the fatigue, the heavy anxious days, the long, weary hours of those sultry, sleepless nights?

Except to go for medicine, for arrowroot, or to summon the doctor on some fresh alarm, Jin never stirred across the threshold, nor drew a breath of fresher air than could be obtained at the window of the sick-chamber.

Amongst other womanly trinkets and trifles, she had a large fan left, of small money value, but admirably adapted to its purpose. Under the judicious application of this instrument, the child gradually became cooler and less feverish. At length, with a few drowsy murmurs, in which

"mamma" and "Moley" were mixed up unintelligibly, the empty phial that had served him for a toy dropped from his poor little wasted fingers, and he went to sleep. Then Jin, bethinking her that the phial must be refilled according to medical directions, sought out the prescription, caught up her bonnet and parasol, drew on her last pair of gloves, and stole downstairs, leaving the door ajar, while impressing on the maid-of-all-work that she must peep in every five minutes to see if the little invalid were still asleep; she herself would not be gone a quarter of an hour.

I don't care how hard a woman is worked, I never knew one yet but could make time to look after a child. From the little girl of three, who carries a doll as big as herself, to the aged dame of threescore, who has been dandling children and children's children all her life, not one of the sex but handles an infant with instinctive dexterity, such as no amount of mere practice could ensure. Even the sourest old maid may be intrusted with a baby; nor is there the slightest fear that she will crease it, drop it, or carry it upside down. The poor drudge who answered Jin's summons with grimy hands and unwashed face, would have liked nothing better than to tend Gustave morning, noon, and night. She only hoped Miss Ross would stay out the whole afternoon.

It was a relief to emerge from the narrow street, and, after five minutes' walk, to cross the Fulham Road. Even that suburban thoroughfare seemed to glitter with life and motion after the gloomy sickroom, and the dull monotony on which its single window looked out. But Jin had no time to spare, and was speedily in the chemist's shop waiting for her prescription to be made up.

The young man behind the counter, clean, curly, smug and white-handed, was affable and considerate. "Take a seat, miss," said he, pointing to a high cane chair. "You seem fatigued like, and faint. The weather, miss, is uncommon hot this season. Very trying to some constitutions. Directly, miss. Certainly. Quite a simple prescription. Shall be made up in five minutes. Address on the phial, I see. Allow me to send it for you."

Poor Jin, faint and weak from watching and exhaustion, protested feebly against this arrangement; glad to sit down, nevertheless, for her knees knocked together, and she trembled from top to toe.

A dreadful misgiving came across her of what was to be done if she should fall ill too; but Jin was not a nervous person, and felt almost capable of keeping off bodily disorder by a strong effort of the will.

In the meantime, the young man, hiding his curly head first in one drawer, then in another, brayed certain mysterious compounds in a mortar, and, dissolving the nauseous mixture, poured it into a fresh bottle, packing the whole carefully in paper, with string and sealing-wax, not handing it to Miss Ross till, in spite of her impatience, he had copied, in fair and legible writing, the whole label attached to the discarded vessel. This last bore no name, but on it were minute directions as to how the draught must be taken, and the address at which it was to be left.

There was less to pay than she expected; but she had not intended to be absent from her boy so long, and, seizing the packet with impatience, dashed out of the shop to hurry home.

There was no shady side of the street. An

afternoon sun beat fiercely on her raven hair, not in the least protected by the wisp of lace, with a leaf in it, that constituted her bonnet. She had slept but little in the last forty-eight hours, and eaten less. Crossing the Fulham Road, everything seemed to turn round with her; the roar, as of a thousand carriages, surged in her ears. She thought she was being run over, and making an effort to reach the kerbstone, staggered, tripped, and fell.

A very handsome horse, with too much plating on his harness, was pulled hard on his haunches; a brougham, painted and varnished like a new toy, stood still with a jerk, and a woman's voice from the interior exclaimed, in high accents of condemnation and command—

"Why don't you stop, you infernal idiot? You've knocked the woman down, and now you want to drive over her!"

Kate Cremorne habitually jumped at conclusions. On the present occasion she jumped also out of her carriage, with exceeding promptitude, and lifted Miss Ross off the ground almost before the bystanders knew the latter had fallen. Glancing at the packet still clutched tightly in her hand, she summoned a benevolent drayman to the rescue, and, with the assistance of that worthy, who testified unqualified approval of the whole proceeding, and called both ladies "pretty dears" more than once during its performance, placed the poor drooping sufferer in the carriage, and directed her groom to drive without delay—"like smoke," I am afraid, was the expression she used—to the address she had so quickly mastered. Then, and not till then, she produced smelling-bottle, fan, and laced handkerchief to restore her charge to consciousness.

In Brompton, you see, as in Samaria of old, are to be found those who bear in mind the great parable that has made the name of Samaritan synonymous with the most Christian-like of all Christian virtues.

Had Kate "passed on, on the other side," she would not have spoiled an extremely expensive morning-dress; she would not have been too late for one of the fastest and liveliest of Richmond dinner-parties; she would not have missed the man of all others in London who most wished to meet her. But to none of these did she give a thought nor a sigh while she bathed Jin's pale temples with eau-de-cologne, and rested the dark drooping head on her snowy bosom, pressing it to her own warm, wilful, reckless, restless heart.

It was not till they reached her remote and shabby refuge, that Miss Ross came thoroughly to herself; but even then she looked so white and ill, that Kate would not hear of leaving her, but insisted on helping her upstairs, and taking command at once as superintendent, head nurse, in short, captain-general of the whole establishment.

Living, so to speak, on the border-land between good and bad society, Kate Cremorne knew Miss Ross perfectly well by sight, though Miss Ross did not know Kate Cremorne. The shrewd, practical, world-experienced girl saw the whole affair at a glance. Through her keen intellect flashed a history of perfidy, sorrow, penury, a scrape, a scandal, a reduced lady, and a half-acted romance. She had sufficient delicacy to conceal her recognition of Miss Ross; but it was Kate's nature to take the lead in whatever position she was placed, and it would not have been her had she failed to make everything airy and comfortable about the sufferer in ten minutes.

She dismissed her brougham, much to the admiration of the public, with directions to return in an hour; she sent the maid out for soup, and the landlady for wine; she did not even forget to order some cut flowers; she rustled up and down stairs without waking Johnnie; she insisted on the front room, fortunately unoccupied, being at once got ready for Miss Ross, producing that best of references—a little *porte-monnaie*, with sovereigns in it. She took off her bonnet, made herself completely at home, kissed the sleeping child, and won the hearts of the people of the house almost ere Jin had thoroughly opened her eyes; and long before the brougham returned to carry her away she had put the invalid to bed, given her a basin of soup, with a glass of port wine in it, and was soothing her off to sleep, gently and quietly as a mother hushes a baby.

"You want rest, dear," she whispered, smoothing the pillow with her strong white hand. "I won't leave you till you're as sound as that beautiful boy in the next room. Then I'll go and sit with him till you wake, and after that I needn't bother you any more, unless you'll let me come and see you the first thing to-morrow morning."

Jin smiled faintly, and opened her eyes.

"I don't know who you are," she whispered; "but you're the only kind-hearted woman I ever met in my life except one. God bless you!"

Then her head sank back, and every nerve seemed to relax in the overpowering motionless sleep of utter exhaustion.

But Kate, watching her, looked very grave and thoughtful. She had not been used to blessings. Perhaps in her whole past she had never earned one so true and heartfelt before. The sensation

was strange, almost oppressive, opening up a new series of hopes, feelings, interests, and reflections, with certain wistful misgivings, that she, fair, fast, flighty Kate Cremorne, had hitherto mistaken the chief objects of her existence, wasted her life, and thrown herself away.

CHAPTER XXVII

A HOUSEHOLD KATE

"WHAT an odd girl you are, Kate!" said Mrs. Battersea, as the sisters sat at breakfast next morning in their pretty suburban garden, with a table drawn under the acacia-tree, and as many birds, roses, and strawberries about them as if they were a hundred miles from London. "You lost the best chance yesterday that ever woman had, and all because you couldn't be in time for a train. My dear, I don't often scold; but it does provoke me to see you throw yourself away. I begin to think you'll never settle, Kate. You're worse than I was; you're worse than I am *now*!"

"That's a bad state of things," answered Kate saucily. "I shouldn't have thought it possible. But what's the use of settling, Auntie?" The eldest sister had once been taken for the younger's aunt, and the nickname had stuck to her. "You talk as if I was some sort of mess on a kitchen hob. Why should I settle, and why do you stir me up? I'm very nice as I am."

"So Mr. Goldthred seems to think!" answered her sister; "and if you'd only been with us yesterday, you'd have had him to yourself the whole afternoon. I'm sure he was disappointed; and to see the barefaced way that odious little Rosie made up to him was quite sickening! Kate

—Kate—don't you want an establishment of your own?"

"What's the good?" replied the other, dipping a bit of cake in her coffee. "I'm very happy as I am—

'Oh, give me back my hollow tree,
My crust of bread, and liberty!'

Freedom and simplicity, say I; communism, equality, and fraternity!"

"Kate, you're talking nonsense," pursued Mrs. Battersea. "Nature never intended you for a country-mouse, and there's no such things as equality, fraternity, and all that. Talk of men being brothers! Bosh! Men are intended for husbands, only you must strike while the iron's hot. They harden sadly if they're allowed to get cool. Oh, Kate! I do wish you'd been with us yesterday! We went on the river after dinner. There was a moon, and everything!"

"Did you have a good dinner?" asked Kate saucily.

"Of course we had," said the other. "But that's nothing to the purpose. I tell you the whole party were paired off, except Goldie; and he went about like a poor disconsolate bird in a frost. Rosie tried hard for him; but he wouldn't look at her; and, besides, she'd got her own admirer. I tell you, if you'd only been on the spot, the whole thing might have been settled."

"Who was there for you?" inquired Miss Kate, with mischievous eyes and a ripe cherry in her mouth, not much redder than the lips against which it bobbed.

"Why the Colonel, naturally," answered Mrs. Battersea. "You knew that quite well, so what's the use of asking? I shall 'shunt' the Colonel,

Kate, after Goodwood, he's getting so *very* grey, and it looks really ridiculous amongst young people, like our party yesterday."

"By all means," assented Kate. "And who's to replace him? Not that half-bred American, Mr. Picard, I hope. Trust me, Auntie; I have predatory instincts, and they never deceive me. That man is an adventurer; he's not a gentleman. Look at him by the others; you see it at once."

Mrs. Battersea burst out laughing.

"Well done, Kate! This is indeed teaching your grandmother. Do you think I'm still too young to run alone? I ought to be flattered, and I *am*. Don't you trouble your head about Picard and me. He's useful for the present. When I've done with him, you may be pretty sure I shall drop him. Now tell me, dear, what the temptation was that kept you away all yesterday, and deprived our party, as the Colonel said, of the 'bonniest bud in the bouquet.'"

"I'd an adventure," enunciated Kate solemnly.

"Was he good-looking?" exclaimed Mrs. Battersea.

"Very!" answered Kate. "But I only saw him asleep. He had the blackest curls and the longest eyelashes I ever beheld on man or woman. Such a darling, Auntie! But though I kissed him without disturbing him one bit, I don't suppose he'll ever pay me the gloves I'm entitled to by all the rules of racing."

Mrs. Battersea looked puzzled.

"What *do* you mean?" said she. "I never can quite make you out when you're in these wild moods. I hope you haven't been getting into mischief. Your spirits run away with you so, I ought never to let you out of my sight."

Kate laughed merrily.

"It's not much of a scrape this time," she answered, "nor much of a lark neither. I paid a morning visit in a fashionable quarter, and was detained longer than I anticipated, that's all. What should you say if I'd found something 'stolen or strayed, lost or mislaid'; something not actually advertised, but that would be worth a reward all the same, if I was to produce it at one or two places I know in London, not to mention the cavalry barracks at Windsor?"

"You speak in parables," said the other, crumbling up bread and cream for her parrot. "When you come down to plain English and common sense, I shall be able to understand."

"I've found Miss Ross!" Kate closed her pretty lips so tight after this startling information that the cherry snapped off at its stalk, and bobbed into her coffee-cup.

"You've found Miss Ross!" repeated her sister, in accents of the utmost astonishment. "Well, it's too bad of Captain Vanguard; quite too bad, I must say! And, Kate, I won't have you getting mixed up with that kind of thing. Recollect we can scarcely hold our own where we are; and although, for myself, I think respectable society rather slow, I don't want you to make the mistakes I did. Never set the world at defiance, my dear; it don't answer. You may humbug people to any extent, but they won't stand being bullied! Don't go near her again, Kate, I beg. Somebody is sure to see you."

"Captain Vanguard has no more to do with it than you have," retorted Miss Cremorne, ignoring her sister's late monitions and reverting to the first count in the indictment. "Why can you

never let him alone? Tell me, Auntie, once for all, what's this grudge of yours against Frank? Poor thing! How has it affronted its aunt?"

Mrs. Battersea looked grave.

"He'll never have a chance of affronting me, Kate, unless he does it through you. He hangs about here a great deal too much. He haunts the places we go to like a ghost; and he looks like a ghost besides, for he has lost his colour, grown very silent, and never smiles. I say nothing, but"—

"You think a great deal, no doubt," replied her sister. "You think wrong this time, though, if you fancy I care two straws about Frank, or Frank about me. He *was* pleasant enough, I grant you; but now that he's got sad, and quiet, and stupidish, he bores me. You ought to know my tastes better than most people, dear. You may be pretty sure one of your languishing swains has very little chance. I hate long stories, long memories, long sighs, and long faces. If people like one, they should make one happy—

'When Love is kind,
Lightsome, and free,
Love's sure to find
Welcome from me;
But if Love brings
Heartache or pang,
Tears, or such things,
Love may go hang!'"

"Which only proves you were never in earnest, Kate," answered the elder woman; adding, with a sigh, "so much the better for you."

Perhaps Mrs. Battersea was thinking of a time long before she met the late Major Battersea, a time when Kate was a little toddling thing, with fat legs, chubby arms, and the manners of a confirmed and shameless flirt; a time when the sands of the

Isle of Wight borrowed a golden gleam from that light which so irradiates the present to leave behind it such grim, ghostly shadows on the past; when the waves sang soft sweet music, softer, sweeter, for the whisper that stole through the drowsy wash and murmur of the tide,—sadder, too, for an instinct that warns the human heart how they will make the same melodious moan, unchanged, unpitying, after they have closed over its happiness for ever; when morning was a vision of hope, and evening a dream of peace, and all day long a waking reality of happiness, because of a straw hat, a sun-burned face, and a light laugh. Perhaps she was contrasting a certain frank, innocent, loving girl, trusting, and true-hearted, with the woman of after years, marred and warped by her first disappointment, carrying war on bravely in the enemy's country, but aching still under all her armour of pride and indifference, with the dull pain of that first grievous wound.

"So much the better for me," repeated Kate thankfully. "You would have said so, indeed, if you could have seen that poor thing yesterday. Pale, worn, dejected, and, my dear, so very badly dressed! I declare I hardly knew her again, and I used to think, for quite a dark beauty, she was the best-looking woman in London. Do you suppose, Auntie, there really *is* such a thing as a broken heart, or is it all nonsense and what they put in novels, and poems, and things? It must hurt horribly if there is!"

"Some people mind it more than others," answered her sister. "Let us be thankful, Kate, that you and I are not of the caring sort. But what do you suppose has brought Miss Ross to this pass? She used to be one of your regular high-fliers.

Went to Court, I fancy, and all the rest of it. And how do you know your precious Frank Vanguard hadn't a finger in the pie?"

"Because I do know," affirmed Miss Kate. "You never saw such a place as she was living in; and I got everything out of the people in the house before I had been there ten minutes."

"I can easily believe it," said her sister. "As usual, taking up another's business and neglecting your own."

"But I mean to make it my own," protested Kate. "You would have been as keen about it as I am, if you had seen the poor thing huddled up in her refuge like a frightened cat in a corner. Table on three legs, chairs falling to pieces, such a small room, such stuffy furniture, and you might have written your name in the dust on everything. Even her gown was all frayed at the skirt, and there wasn't another in the wardrobe, for I peeped in to see. I shall be off again directly after breakfast, and perhaps to-day I may worm something out of her, and get her to let me help her in earnest, you know. How sad, Auntie, to come to such a pass! Fancy not having enough to eat, and only one gown to put on!"

"But the child," persisted Mrs. Battersea, "the child couldn't have come there by chance. Kate, I wish you'd let it all alone."

"The child was as clean as a new pin," answered Miss Cremorne. "There was everything he could want arranged for him as nicely as if he was a little emperor! That's why I'm sure she's his mother. I don't care if she's his grandmother a hundred times over. I'll stick by her now through this mess, whatever it is. I've gone in for it, and I'll see it out! I'll charter a hansom, though;

I won't take the brougham, it makes people stare."

Mrs. Battersea pondered, and the parrot, waiting for his breakfast, shrieked hideously.

"Don't you think I'm right?" asked the impatient girl.

"I know you won't be stopped," answered the other, "right or wrong. But were I in your place I should certainly not interfere. If Captain Vanguard has anything to do with the business, I cannot see what good will come of your mixing yourself up in it. Frank's very good-looking, I grant you, and pleasanter company than half the men we meet; but I don't suppose he really cares two pins for anything but his horses; and as for heart, my dear Kate, these guardsmen are all alike—they throw the article systematically away before their moustache is grown, and find they get on very much better without it afterwards."

"They may throw them about till they're tired," answered Kate. "They'll have to wait a long time before I stoop to pick one up, Auntie. I never saw the man yet that was worth crossing the street for, after a shower. Did you?"

"*One*, Kate," said Mrs. Battersea, "long ago. I'd have gone into the Serpentine, up to my neck at least, for him."

"Why didn't you?" asked the other. "What has become of him?"

"He never asked me," replied Mrs. Battersea, with something of a tremble in her voice. "I thought I was so sure of him, I could get him back at any time, and one fine morning I pulled my thread the least thing too hard, and it broke. I saw him the other day, Kate, quite by accident. He hasn't forgiven, for all the years that are

past, — and, though it seems ridiculous, I haven't forgotten."

"Never say die, Auntie," laughed the girl. "You've plenty of admirers left!"

"Plenty!" added Mrs. Battersea; "but they're not the real stuff. They're like cheap dresses, my dear, look well enough while they're new, but when they've been worn a little, particularly in bad weather, they go all to pieces."

"The Colonel, for instance," observed Kate. "He's so threadbare now, I don't think he'll even make up into patchwork, or even pen-wipers. Auntie, you're very hard upon the Colonel, and I do believe he's fond of you."

"So he ought to be," answered Mrs. Battersea. "But let the Colonel alone, Kate, and take my advice. If you find a man who really likes you better than his dinner, his Derby, his covert-shooting, or his best horse, don't stop to consider whether he is romantic, and popular, and admired. Make up your mind at once. Take him frankly, unless you absolutely hate the creature. Stand by him honestly, and never throw him over. When you're as old as I am, you'll be glad you followed my advice."

"I must first catch my hare," replied Miss Kate, rising from the table; "and then there's an end of the excitement, the ups-and-downs, the ins-and-outs, the falls and fences, in short, all the fun of the hunt. Well, who knows! Perhaps my time may come, like another's.

'Puis ce que ça doit se tirer au sort.'

But meanwhile I do very well as I am, and when I've found my master it will be quite soon enough to knuckle down and give in. So now I'm off to my

poor sick bird, to nurse her chick, and sleek her feathers, and put to rights her untidy little nest."

Accordingly, in less than ten minutes Miss Cremorne emerged into the sunshine, as well-looking and as well-dressed a young lady as could be seen treading the pavement of any street in London. A butcher's boy, with tray on shoulder, stopped short in his whistle to look after her, transported with admiration. A young man from the country stood stock-still under the very pole of an omnibus, and grinned his approval open-mouthed ; while an old gentleman, who ought to have known better, crossed the muddiest part of the street, and affected great interest in an upholsterer's window, to get one more look at her pretty face as she tripped past. The very cabman whom she signalled off the rank forebore to overcharge her, and came down officiously from the perch of his hansom to keep her dress off the wheel when she alighted, wondering the while at the homely exterior of the dwelling in which this vision of beauty disappeared.

"It's a queer start!" soliloquised that worthy in his own expressive vernacular; "and females, as a general rule, is up to all sorts of games. But she ain't one of that sort, she ain't. Blessed if she don't look as bold as Britannia, the beauty! and as hinnocent as a nosegay all the while!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

TENDER AND TRUE

ACCORDING to promise, Picard called on Sir Henry at his house in town, and was fortunate enough to find the baronet at home, but being ushered into a room on the ground-floor, smelling strongly of tobacco-smoke, his heart misgave him that he was about to fail in the chief object of his visit, and that Helen had gone out. He was further discomfited by his host's information that she was at Blackgrove, with no intention of returning to London till next spring. The adventurer's brow clouded. He had but little time for delay, and felt, to use his own expression, that the moment had arrived when he must force the running, come with a rush, and win on the post the best way he could.

Affecting, therefore, an air of deep concern, he sat himself down opposite Sir Henry, who, wrapped in velvet, occupied the easiest of chairs, with a French novel on his knee, and began to apologise for disturbing him.

"But I wanted to see you," said Picard, in a more subdued tone than usual, "because, in trying

to do you a good turn, I've got you into a mess. It is fortunate you are a man of position, and—and—of means, Sir Henry, so that this is a matter of mere temporary inconvenience, but it is equally distressing to me, I assure you, just the same."

"What do you mean?" said Sir Henry, turning pale, while the French novel fluttered to his feet.

"Simply, that in following my lead about those shares I fear you have come to grief. Not to the extent I have, of course, but still enough to make you very shy of taking my advice in money matters again. I shall pull through myself, eventually, well enough; but I had rather lose every shilling I possess than that a friend of mine should sustain injury by my advice or example."

The nobility of this sentiment was thrown away on Sir Henry, who swore an ugly oath, and for a moment seemed in danger of losing his habitual self-command.

"Why, you told me those cursed Colorados were a certainty!" he exclaimed; "'a clear gain of fifty per cent.,' were your very words, no questions asked, and no risk to run. You're not a baby, my good fellow! Who was it that took you in, I should like to know? He must have his wits about him, that gentleman!"

"I can only repeat I did everything for the best," answered Picard loftily. "I trust you were not in it very deep!"

"Deep!" growled the baronet. "I don't know what you call *deep*. I counted on those cursed shares to pay off all my pressing liabilities, and to square me with *you* in particular. Now that one card has gone, the whole house will tumble down, of course. It's always the way. Hang it, Picard!

you oughtn't to have been so cock-sure, man. Well, it's no use talking. I'm simply floored, that's all; and how I'm to be picked up this time beats my comprehension altogether."

"You have friends, Sir Henry," said Picard. "Plenty of them."

"Plenty of them!" echoed Sir Henry. "Staunch friends and true, who would dine with me, bet with me, shoot with me, nay, some of whom would even back me up in a row, or pull for me while hounds were running if I got a fall, but who would see me d—d before they lent me a shilling, or put their names to a bill for eighteenpence."

"That may be true enough with some of your swell acquaintance," replied Picard, "but you mustn't lump us all in together and ticket us 'Rotten.' I myself am ready, now, this moment, to do my utmost to assist you. Sir Henry, I am a real friend."

"If you know my liabilities, by Heaven you are!" exclaimed the baronet, with a sarcastic grin.

"I don't care a cent for your liabilities!" said the other, as indeed he might safely say; and perhaps Sir Henry's knowledge of the world attributed this generosity to the recklessness of one who had nothing to lose. "I don't care what they are, I'll see you through them. I am your friend—your true friend—Sir Henry—I am more than a friend. The dearest wish of my heart is to be in the same boat with yourself and your family, sink or swim."

In an instant the baronet's whole demeanour changed to one of studied and even guarded courtesy. He rose from his chair, stood with his back to the empty fireplace, and inclined politely to his visitor.

"I do not quite understand," said he. "Pray explain."

Picard hesitated. There was something embarrassing in the other's attitude. It combined civility, defiance, vigilance, all the ingredients, indeed, of an armed neutrality. At last he got out the words, "Your daughter, Sir Henry—Miss Hallaton."

"Stop a moment," interrupted the baronet, still in those guarded, courteous tones; "how can my daughter be concerned in our present business?"

"Simply," answered the other, fairly driven into a corner, "that I had meant—that I had intended—in short, that I had hoped you might be induced to entertain—I mean, to listen favourably. Hang it! Sir Henry, I am devotedly attached to your daughter—there!"

Sir Henry drew himself up. "You do Miss Hallaton a great honour," said he very stiffly, "and one I beg to decline most distinctly on her behalf. This is a subject which admits of no further discussion between you and me."

"Are you in earnest?" exclaimed Picard fiercely. "Do you know what you are doing? Have you counted the cost of making me your enemy? Sir Henry, you must surely have lost your head or your temper?"

"Neither, I assure you," answered the other, with provoking calmness; adding, while he laid his hand on the bell-pull—"May I offer you a glass of sherry, and—and—*bitters*, before you go?"

For the life of him, he could not resist a sarcastic emphasis while he named that wholesome tonic, nor could he help smiling as Picard, losing all self-control, flung out of the room, with no more courteous leave-taking than a consignment of the

proffered refreshment to a temperature where it would have proved acceptable in the highest degree.

But no sooner had the street-door closed on his visitor, than Sir Henry shook himself, as it were, out of a life's lethargy, and seemed to become a new man. It was his nature to rise against a difficulty; and, although he had never before had such a souse in the cold waters of adversity, he felt braced and strengthened by the plunge. He sat down at once to his writing-table, and immersed himself in calculations as to liabilities and means of meeting them. Ruin stared him in the face. He was convinced he had nothing to hope from Picard's forbearance, with whom he was inextricably mixed up in money matters. He saw clearly that the latter would use every legal engine in his power to further his revenge; yet Sir Henry's courage failed him not a jot, and he only cursed the scoundrel's impudence in thinking himself good enough for Helen, vowing the while he would be a match for them all, and fight through yet.

Then he wrote many letters to solicitors, money-lenders, and private friends; amongst others, one to Helen, and one to Mrs. Lascelles. It is with this last alone we have to do.

That lady is sitting, somewhat disconsolate and lonely, in the pretty boudoir at No. 40. The bullfinch is moulting, and sulky in the extreme; the pug has been dismissed for the only misdemeanour of which he is ever guilty—indigestion, followed by sickness; the post has just brought Sir Henry Hallaton's letter; Mrs. Lascelles is dissolved in tears; and Goldthred, who has not been near her for a fortnight, is suddenly announced.

All the morning, all the drive hither in a hansom cab, all the way upstairs, he has been revolving

how he can best carry out Kate Cremorne's precept —*Il faut se faire valoir*; but at the top step the loyalty of a true disinterested love asserts itself, and he would fain fall prone at the feet of his mistress, bidding her trample him in the dust if she had a mind.

Seeing her in tears, he turned hot and cold, dropped his hat, knocked down a spidery table in trying to recover it, and finally shook hands with the woman he loved stiffly and pompously, as if she had been his bitterest enemy.

The grasp of her hand, too, seemed less cordial, her manner less kindly than usual. Goldthred, who had yet to learn that the fortress never mans its walls with so much menace as on the eve of surrender, felt chilled, dispirited, even hurt; but, because of her distress, staunch and unwavering to the backbone.

"You find me very unhappy," said she, drying her eyes (gently, so as not to make them unbecomingly red). "Why have you never been to see me?"

This, turning on him abruptly, and with a degree of displeasure that ought to have raised his highest hopes.

"I've been away," he stammered, "in the North on business. I—I didn't know you wanted me."

"Oh, it's not *that*," she answered pettishly. "Of course, one can't expect people to put off their business, or pleasure, or anything else for the sake of friends. What's the use of friends? What's the use of caring for anything or anybody? I wish I didn't. I shouldn't be so upset now!"

In his entire participation of her sorrow, he quite lost his own embarrassment.

"Can I do anything?" he exclaimed. "There's the will, you know, even if there isn't the power."

"Nothing, that I can see," she answered drearily. "Here's a letter from Sir Henry Hallaton. They're completely ruined, he tells me; a regular smash! What is to become of them? I'm so wretched, particularly about Helen."

She put her handkerchief to her face once more, but watched her listener narrowly, nevertheless. It did not escape her that his countenance changed and fell, as if he had been stung.

He recovered himself bravely, though.

"That is distressing enough," said he, "and sounds a bad business, no doubt. Still, it is only a question of money, I suppose. It might have been worse."

"Worse!" she repeated, with impatience. "I don't see how. From what he says, it seems they won't have a roof to cover them—hardly bread to eat! And what can I do for him? I can't pay off his mortgages, and buy him back Blackgrove, as if it was a baby-house. It does seem so hard! It makes me hate everything and everybody!"

Goldthred's only reply to this rational sentiment was to rise from his chair, button his coat, and place himself in a determined attitude on the hearthrug.

"You seem very miserable," said he; and the man's voice was so changed that she started as if a stranger had come into the room. "I think I can understand why—no, don't explain anything, Mrs. Lascelles, but listen to me—you are unhappy. To the best of my power I will help you. Somebody that you — well, that you like very much is in difficulties. If I can extricate him, I will. You needn't hate everything or everybody any longer," he added, with rather a sad smile; "and you may

believe that, though people do not put off their business nor their pleasure for them, they can sometimes sacrifice their interest to their friends."

How noble he seemed standing there—so kind, so good, so utterly unselfish and true! How she loved him! She had long guessed it. She knew it too surely now. Yet she could not forbear taking the last arrow from her quiver, and sending it home to his honest, unsuspecting heart.

"It is very kind of you, Mr. Goldthred," said she, "to speak as you do, particularly as you always mean what you say; but, though I often fancied you liked her, I had no idea your attachment to Miss Hallaton was so strong as all that!"

He turned very pale, and stooped over the moulting bullfinch, without speaking; then raised his head, looking—as she had never seen him look before—resolved, even stern, thoughtful, saddened, yet not the least unkind; and the voice, that had trembled a while ago, was firm and decided now.

"If you are joking, Mrs. Lascelles," said he, "the jest is unworthy of *you*, and unfair on *me*. If you really think what you say, it is time you were undeceived. Miss Hallaton is no more to me than a young lady in whom you take an interest. For her father I am prepared to make any sacrifice, because I think you— Mrs. Lascelles, will you forgive what I am going to say?"

"I don't know," she answered, smiling very brightly, considering that the tears still glittered in her eyes. "I might be more deeply offended than you suppose. What if you were going to say you think I am in love with Sir Henry Hallaton?"

"I think you *are* in love with Sir Henry Hallaton," he repeated very gravely. "I think your happiness has long been dependent on his

society. I think you would marry him to-morrow if he asked you. I think he would ask you to-day if his position admitted of it. I do not live a great deal in the world, Mrs. Lascelles, and I daresay I am rather dull in a general way; but the stupidest people can see things that affect their interests or their happiness; and I have often watched every word and look of yours, when you thought perhaps I had no more perception, no more feeling, than that marble chimney-piece. Sometimes with a sore heart enough; but that is all over now! Ought I to have told you long ago, or ought I to have held my tongue for ever? I don't know; but I need not tell you now, that from the day I was introduced to you, at the Thames Regatta — I daresay you've forgotten all about it—I have admired you, and—and—cared for you more than anything in the world. You're too bright and too beautiful and too good for me, I know; but that don't prevent my wanting to see you happy, and happy you *shall* be, Mrs. Lascelles, if everything I can do has the power to make you so!"

His voice may have failed him somewhat during this simple little declaration, but seemed steady enough when he finished; and it could not, therefore, have been from sympathy with his emotion that the tears were again rising fast to his listener's blue eyes.

"I remember it perfectly," she sobbed. "You were talking to a fat woman in a hideous yellow gown. Why do you say I don't?"

"Remember what?" he asked innocently, not being quite conversant with a manœuvre much practised by ladies in difficulties, and similar to that resource which is termed in the prize-ring "sparring for wind."

"Why, the first time I met you," she answered.

"You're not the only person who has a memory, and feelings, and all that. I know you must think me a brute, and so I am; but still, I'm not quite a woman of stone!"

"I have told you what I think of you," said he very quietly. "Now, tell me what I can do for you, and him."

"Do you mean," she asked, peeping slyly out of her little useless handkerchief, "that you would actually give me up to somebody else, and part with your money, which is always a criterion of sincerity, for such an object? Mr. Goldthred, is *that* what you call love?"

"I only want you to be happy," said he. "I don't understand much about love and flirtation; and these things people make such a talk about. I want to see you happy. No, not that; for I should avoid seeing you, at least just at first; but I should like to *know* you were happy, and that it was my doing."

He turned, and leaned his elbows on the chimney-piece, not to look in the glass, for his face was buried in his hands, so that she had some difficulty in attracting his attention. It was not a romantic action, but she gave a gentle pull at his coat-tails.

"You *can* make me happy," she whispered, with a deep and very becoming blush. "I don't think it will be at all inconvenient or unpleasant to you, only—only, you know, I can't exactly suggest it first."

He turned as if he was shot. With white face and parted lips, never man looked more astonished while he gasped out—

"And you wouldn't marry Sir Henry Hallaton?"

She shook her head with a very bewitching smile.

"And you would marry me?" he continued, hardly daring to believe it was not all a dream.

"You've never asked me," was the reply; but he was on the sofa at her side by this time, whispering his answer so closely in her ear, that I doubt if either heard it, while both knew pretty well what it meant; and though their subsequent conversation was carried on in a strange mixture of broken sentences, irrational expressions, and idiotic dumb show, it took less than ten minutes to arrive at a definite conclusion, entailing on Goldthred the necessity of immediate correspondence with his nearest relatives, and a visit to Doctor's Commons at no far distant date.

But, happy as he felt, breathing elixir, treading upon air, while walking home to dress for dinner, he found time for the purchase of such a beautiful fan as can hardly be got for money, and sent it forthwith to Kate Cremorne, with the following line written in pencil on his card—*Il faut se faire valoir.*

CHAPTER XXIX

DAYBREAK

IT is only your cubs bred last season, not yet many months emancipated from the tender authority of the vixen, that hang to their homes, and run circling round the covert when disturbed by the diligence of their natural enemy, the hound. An old fox is a wild fox; and no sooner does he recognise the mellow note of the huntsman's cheer, the crack of the first whip's ponderous thong, than he is on foot and away, lively as a lark, with a defiant whisk of his brush, that means seven or eight miles as the crow flies, the exercise of all his speed during the chase, and all his craft to beat you at the finish. If you would have that brush on your chimney-piece, that sharp little nose on your kennel door, you must be pretty quick after him, for he wastes not a moment in hesitation, facing the open resolutely for his haven, crossing the fields like an arrow, wriggling through the fences like an eel.

Sir Henry Hallaton had been too often hunted not to take alarm at the first intelligence of real danger, therefore it was that he put the Channel between himself and his creditors without delay, knowing well from experience that a man never makes such good terms as when out of his enemy's reach; and so, trusting in the chapter of accidents which had often befriended him, smoked his

cigar tranquilly in a pleasant little French town, while his family, his servants, his tradesmen, everybody connected with him, were paying, in distress, discomfort, and anxiety, the penalties this self-indulgent gentleman had incurred for his own gratification.

There could scarcely have been a greater contrast than the position of father and daughter when the crash first came.

Sir Henry lived in cheerful apartments, dined at a tolerable *table-d'hôte*, sipped a *petit vin de Bordeaux* that always agreed with him, smoked good cigars, and frequented a social circle, not very distinguished, nor indeed very respectable, but in which, with his fatal facility of getting into mischief, he found himself always amused.

When his letters were written and posted, he felt without a care in the world for the rest of the day, and positively looked younger and fresher in his exile than at any time during the last five years, though there was an execution in the house at Blackgrove, and he had not a shilling to his name.

Helen, on the contrary, found herself beset with every kind of annoyance and difficulty, from the black looks of a principal creditor to the loud reproaches of a discharged scullery-maid. Her father indeed wrote her full and explicit directions what to do in the present crisis; but even to a girl of her force of character, many of the details she had to carry out were painful and embarrassing in the extreme. On her shoulders fell the burden of settling with the servants, the land-steward, the very gamekeepers and watchers on the estate. She advertised the stock and farming implements; she sent the horses and carriages to Tattersall's; she negotiated the rescue of her sister's pianoforte out of the general smash. It had been

arranged that those young ladies should pay a visit to their aunt, and Helen packed up their things, and started them, nothing loath, by the railway, and furnished them with money for their journey. Her purse was nearly empty when she returned from the station, and, sitting down to rest after her labours, in the dreary waste of a dismantled home, she realised, for the first time, the loneliness and misery of her position.

She had borne up bravely while there was necessity for action, while her assumed cheerfulness and composure implied a tacit protest against the abuse poured on her father; but in the solitude of the big drawing-room, with the carpets up, and the furniture "put away," she fairly broke down, leaning her head against the chimney-piece, and crying like a child.

She never saw the Midcombe fly toiling up the avenue; she never heard it grinding round to the door; she was thinking rather bitterly that her young life's happiness had been sacrificed through no fault of hers; that she had been misunderstood, ill-treated; that even her father, whom she loved so dearly, had placed her in a position of humiliation and distress; that everybody was against her, and she had not a friend in the world, when a light step, the rustle of a dress, and a well-known voice, caused her to start and look up. The next moment, with a little faint cry, that showed how stout-hearted Helen had been tried, she was in the embrace of Mrs. Lascelles, with her head on that lady's shoulder, who did not refrain from shedding a few tears for company.

"My dear, you mustn't stay here another instant," exclaimed the latter. "Where are your things? Where is your maid? I've kept the fly, and you're to come back with me by the five o'clock train. Your

father says so. I've got his letter here. No. Where have I put it? Don't explain, dear; I know everything. He told me all about it from the first, and I should have been down sooner but for those abominable excursion trains. Ring the bell. Send for all the servants there are left, and tell them to get your boxes ready immediately! You're to pay me a nice long visit, my precious! And, oh! Helen, I've got so much to tell you!"

The girl was already smiling through her tears. Even in the midst of ruin it seemed no small consolation to have such a friend as this; and there was a hearty brightness about Mrs. Lascelles, not to be damped by the despondency of the most hopeless companion.

"How good of you to come!" she said. "How like you, and how unlike anybody else! I've had a deal of trouble here, but it's all over at last. I've managed everything for him the best way I could, and now I must go to poor papa, and take care of him in that miserable little French town."

"Poor papa, indeed!" echoed the other. "I've no patience with him! But, however, it's no use talking about that to you. Only, my dear, don't distress yourself unnecessarily about poor papa. He'll do very well, and there's no occasion for you to go abroad at all. We shall have him back in a week. Friends have turned up in the most unaccountable manner. How shall I ever tell you all about it? In the first place, Helen dear, I'm going to be married!"

"*You!*" exclaimed Helen, in accents of undisguised astonishment; adding, after a moment's pause, as good manners required, "I'm sure I wish you joy!"

"Thank ye, dear," was the off-handed answer;

"and who d'ye think is the adversary, the what d'ye call it—the happy man?"

Two little separate spasms of jealousy shot through Helen simultaneously. It couldn't be Frank Vanguard, surely! And if it could, what did that matter to her? Perhaps it was Sir Henry. Helen had long learned to consider papa as her own property, and I am not sure but that this pang was sharper than the other.

"Anybody I know?" she asked, trembling in her secret heart for the reply.

"You know him quite well," answered Mrs. Lascelles, laughing. "Indeed, he's a great admirer of yours, and at one time—no, I won't tell stories, I never was jealous of you and Mr. Goldthred, although you're much younger and prettier than me."

Helen certainly gave a sigh of relief, while Mrs. Lascelles glanced, not without satisfaction, at her own radiant face and figure in the glass.

"I'm sure I don't know how it all came about," she said, still laughing. "But, however, there it is! It's a great fact, and upon my word I'm very glad of it. Now you know he's got plenty of money, Helen (though I didn't marry him for that, I've enough of my own), and like the good fellow he is, he has promised to help your father through his difficulties. There's no sort of reason why you shouldn't all live here as formerly, but in the meantime it won't hurt those girls to go to their aunt for a bit (I hope she will keep them in order), and you are to come to No. 40 with me."

This was, indeed, good news. Helen could hardly believe her ears, and the young lady who now tripped lightly about the house, getting her things together, and busying herself to afford her

visitor the indispensable cup of tea, was extremely unlike the forlorn damsel who had been paying off servants and poring over accounts the whole of that dreary, disheartening day.

But more comfort was yet in store for Helen, as if Fate, having punished her enough, had now relented in her favour. The tea was drunk, the fly was packed, and the ladies were driven to Midcombe Station, in the interchange of no more interesting communications than were compatible with the bustle of departure and the jingling of their vehicle; but no sooner were they established in a first-class carriage, with the door locked, than Mrs. Lascelles, turning to her companion, asked, as though she were carrying on the thread of some previous conversation—

"And who do you think, Helen—who *do* you think I found in the station meaning to come down to you at Blackgrove? He was actually taking his ticket. But I wouldn't hear of it, of course, and ordered him at once to do nothing of the kind."

"Mr. Goldthred, I suppose," guessed Helen.

"Not a bad shot!" answered the other. "Yes, he wanted to come, too; and begged and prayed very hard yesterday. Of course I forbade him. I'm not particular, but still, my dear, *les convenances*! No, Goldthred knew he mustn't last night. It was Frank Vanguard I found fussing about on the platform this morning."

Hurt, wounded as she had been, in spite of all her pride, all her injuries, the tears rose in Helen's eyes, while she thought of her false lover hurrying down to take his share of her distress. Perhaps he he was not false after all. Perhaps time would exonerate him, demonstrating, in some romantic and mysterious manner, that the unaccountable

neglect she had so resented was not really his fault. She had been making excuses for him to her own heart ever since they parted. She was longing to forgive him fully and freely now.

But, unlike her companion, Miss Hallaton kept her feelings a long way below the surface, so it was a very calm, proud face she turned to Mrs. Lascelles, while in a perfectly unmoved tone she observed—

"Captain Vanguard is a great friend of papa's, and I am sure he would be very sorry to hear of our misfortunes."

"He *looked* it!" answered the other meaningly. "Poor fellow, he was as white as a sheet, and his face seemed almost haggard for so young a man! It can't be entirely smoking and late hours, for that plague of mine smokes and sits up like other people, yet he's got plenty of colour, and his eyes are as clear as yours or mine. I must say I like a man to look fresh. There's something wrong about Frank. He's sadly altered of late, and I can't quite make him out."

Miss Hallaton was looking steadfastly through the window, while she replied—

"I haven't remarked it. To be sure, I've not seen him lately. He used to have very good spirits as far as I recollect."

"He's not been the same man since Jin disappeared," said Mrs. Lascelles, with malice prepense, no doubt, but possibly cruel only to be kind. "Yet I'm by no means clear he had anything to do with that most mysterious business. He never could have shammed ignorance so naturally when we all consulted together, though I must say he seemed the least anxious of the party. I used sometimes to fancy he liked her, and sometimes I fancied it

was somebody else. I think so still. What do you say, Helen?"

But Helen changed the subject, skilfully diverting her companion's thoughts to her approaching marriage, a topic of so engrossing a nature, that it lasted all the way to London, and was not half exhausted when interrupted by the *fiancée's* characteristic exclamation, as their train glided smoothly alongside the platform—

"What a goose he is! I knew he'd come to meet us! How pleased he'll be to see I've brought you. Helen, he's a dear fellow. He's as good as gold!"

He was as good as gold. Subject to the touch-stone of happiness, Goldthred's character came out like a picture lit by gas. The tints were brighter, the lines more firmly marked, there appeared more depth, more meaning, more force and character in his whole composition, and Mrs. Lascelles, who had begun by pitying as much as she loved him, found the pity changed to respect, and the love grown stronger than ever. She was proud of him now, while he, exulting in the distinction, strove all the more to continue worthy of her good opinion.

Surely on earth there is no incentive to virtue so powerful as the entire affection of that one being who represents our ideal of some purer and higher sphere. The idol is mere clay, no doubt, but the divine spark exists at least in the worshipper; and it may be that the stubborn human heart, now in a dream of joy, now in an agony of suffering, is thus trained and taught to look up from the limited and imperfect creature to the boundless attributes of the Creator.

After her late excitement and distress, Helen had much need of rest, both for body and mind.

At No. 40 she found herself in a secure and peaceful haven, where, even during the flood-tide of a London season, she might have

"Listened to the roar
Of the breakers on the bar outside that never reach the shore,"

but where in the hot dull autumn, when everybody was out of town, she could remain perfectly tranquil and undisturbed, with Mrs. Lascelles to humour her like a child, and Goldthred always ready to anticipate her lightest wish.

It did not take many days before the firmness had returned to her step, the light to her eyes, and she was once more the "belle Hélène," as Mrs. Lascelles loved to call her, with a vague notion the title was extremely classical and correct.

But it was quite contrary to the principles of the elder lady that anyone who possessed health and beauty should be mewed up, as she was pleased to express herself, while the weather tempted everybody out of doors. Sitting at luncheon, with Miss Hallaton on one side, and the faithful Goldthred on the other, she exclaimed, with the glee of an idle child who has found a new plaything, looking very bright and handsome the while—

"Happy thought! Let us drive down to-morrow to Oatlands! Weep at the dogs' graves, peep at the grotto, sit by the river, dine, and come back by moonlight. Who says done? It's almost the next thing to a water-party."

"Done!" exclaimed both her companions at the same moment, one with careless acquiescence, the other with intense admiration.

"Carried!" said the hostess, clapping her hands. "We three in the open carriage — must have a fourth. Who is it to be?"

But one was out of town, another couldn't get away early enough in the afternoon; this person wouldn't come without the certainty of meeting that. Of two charming sisters both must be asked or neither. In short, the fourth seat in the carriage was wanted for half a dozen people, and the prospective little dinner out of town soon assumed the dimensions of a picnic.

Thus it fell out that Mrs. Lascelles had to write several notes after luncheon, and "dear Helen" sat down to help her, while Goldthred, lounging about and failing sadly in his efforts to make the bullfinch pipe, volunteered to post these missives on his way to the club when they were finished.

Pocketing them all in a lump, and expressing his intention of returning at teatime, Mr. Goldthred took his departure to walk down the street with the jaunty step and lightsome air of a happy lover.

At the nearest pillar-post he stopped to fulfil his promise, and being (though in love) a man of business, looked carefully at their addresses before dropping the letters one by one into the slide.

The very topmost was Helen's production, and he started violently the moment its superscription caught his eye. Hastily examining two more in the same handwriting, he replaced the whole in his pocket, hailed a hansom and drove straight home, where he ran to his writing-table, unlocked a drawer and pulled out a certain little note that he had received one night at his club a while ago, that had puzzled him exceedingly at the time, and that was, perhaps, the only secret he kept from Mrs. Lascelles, because he had found himself unable to explain it till to-day.

Yes, there could be no doubt, it was the same

handwriting, he felt convinced, fully as ever was Malvolio. The unknown correspondent who wrote—"If you are really in earnest, come to-morrow ; there is somebody to be consulted besides me," was Miss Hallaton! "There's something very queer about this," pondered Goldthred. "The girl's met with some foul play somewhere or another. It's all right now. I'll have it out with her to-night before I sleep —then I can tell my beautiful queen, and she will decide what ought to be done."

And Mr. Goldthred in his preoccupation forgetting to post the letters he had examined so carefully, brought them all back to No. 40 in his pocket, so that the expedition to Oatlands fell through after all.

CHAPTER XXX

REMORSEFUL

MRS. LASCELLES was a lady who could ill keep a secret. Such disclosures as those made in the boudoir after tea, when Helen had gone upstairs to rest, roused alike her indignation and her sympathy ; she would have cried for justice from the housetops, rather than suffer the fraud to pass unexposed. Even Goldthred did not escape rebuke for the very negative part he had taken in the transaction.

"Why didn't you bring it here that instant?" she asked, in her pretty imperious way, while she filled her admirer's teacup, and offered him the easiest chair in the room. "You shouldn't have kept such a thing from me for half a second. It's not like you to be so wicked, and I'm determined to scold you well!"

"But it was one o'clock in the morning," urged Goldthred, with a comical look of deprecation. "And you must remember I thought you didn't care a bit for me then. Of course it would be different *now*."

"That's nonsense," she exclaimed. "You know I always liked you ; and as for your cool suggestion of coming here at one in the morning *now*, I beg you won't attempt anything of the kind. But you *ought* to have told me indeed, because,

after all, the note might have been from somebody who had fallen in love with you!"

"I didn't suppose such a thing possible," he answered simply, "and I'm sure I didn't wish it. I used to think happiness was never intended for me. The one I liked seemed so much too good. I'm often afraid I shall wake and find it all a dream."

"Not half good enough," she murmured, making a great clatter among the cups and saucers. "I wish I was ten times better, and I mean to be. But never mind about that. Don't you see exactly what has happened?"

"No, I don't," he answered, wondering fondly whether in Europe could be found such a pair of hands and arms as were hovering about the tea-tray under his nose. "I daresay I'm very stupid, but hang me if I can see daylight anywhere!"

"Not if you look for it in my bracelet," she said, laughing. "But it's obvious Helen has written you a note intended for somebody else. Unless"—here she threatened him with a pretty finger he longed to kiss—"unless you have reason to believe she valued the admiration you could not disguise in all your looks and actions."

"Don't say such things!" he exclaimed in the utmost alarm. "Mrs. Lascelles, do you think I'm —I'm that sort of fellow? Surely *you* know me better. Surely you are only in joke!"

"You're deep, sir," she continued, still laughing at an earnestness that touched while it amused her. "Deep and sly! However, I'll believe you this time, and if you're honestly stupid I'll condescend to explain. Can you take in that if the note wasn't written to you, it must have been

intended for somebody else? I can guess who that somebody is. I'll ask Helen point-blank. She's as proud as Lucifer, but I think she has confidence in me."

She *did* ask Helen point-blank, and that young lady, though as proud as Lucifer, condescended to own the truth, but accompanied her confession with a solemn declaration that everything was at an end between herself and Frank Vanguard, so that the great desire of her heart now was never to set eyes on him again. Mrs. Lascelles, interpreting these sentiments in her own way, sat down forthwith, and penned the following little note, for further mystification of this bewildered young officer :—

"DEAR CAPTAIN VANGUARD,—I have discovered something you ought to know. Such an *embrouillement* was never heard of but in an improbable farce, or still more improbable novel. Come to luncheon to-morrow, and we will lay our heads together in hopes of unravelling the skein. Miss Hallaton is staying with me. You will like to meet her, I am sure, only you and I must have our conference *first*.—Yours very sincerely, ROSE LASCELLES."

Frank's heart leaped under his cuirass while he read this mysterious epistle, on his return from a sweltering inspection in the Long Walk. He had been trying to persuade himself he did not care for Helen, and fancied he succeeded. It was humiliating to feel that the bare mention of her name could thus affect him, yet was there a keen, strange pleasure in the sensation nevertheless.

On the barrack-room table of this fortunate dragoon there lay, however, another little missive, bearing to that of Mrs. Lascelles the sort of likeness a penwiper has to a butterfly. Its envelope was squarer and larger, its monogram gaudier and more intricate, its superscription fainter, paler, more aslant, more illegible. It exhaled a strong odour

of musk, and was written on paper that glistened like satin.

"DEAR FRANK,—I shall be in the Park to-morrow, at twelve. Look for the pony-carriage. I *want* you—so no nonsense. Don't fail —there's a good fellow.—Yours truly, KATE CREMORNE.

"*P.S.*—If I'm not under the clock, wait there till I come."

"What can she be up to now?" thought Frank, carefully twisting this communication into a spill with which to light his cigar. "Got into a mess of some sort, no doubt, and expects me to pull her through, like the rest of them. How odd it is, I'm always blundering into entanglements with women I don't care two straws about, and the one I really *could* love, the one who would make me a good man, I do believe, and certainly a happy one, seems to be drifting every day farther and farther out of my reach. I shall see her to-morrow, and what then? I suppose our greeting will be confined to a distant bow, and some conventional sentence more painful than a cut direct. Still, I shall see her. That will be something. How strange it seems to be so easily satisfied now, when I think of all I hoped and expected so short a time ago. Well, beggars mustn't be choosers. I suppose I may as well meet Kate Cremorne first, and do her a turn if I can. She's a good girl, Kate, after all. Not half a bad-looking one, neither, and as honest as the day."

So twelve o'clock found Frank very nicely dressed, and with a wonderfully prosperous air, considering his many troubles, picking his way daintily across the deserted Ride, to where a solitary pony-carriage, with a solitary pony drawing, and a solitary lady driving it, stood like a pretty toy, drawn up by the footway under the clock.

Miss Cremorne received him with coldness, even displeasure. She entertained a high opinion of her own acuteness, and thought she had hit upon a discovery by no means to his credit. In her many visits to Miss Ross—visits never made empty-handed, and to which, in all probability, the latter owed her restoration to health—she gathered from Jin that a friendship had lately existed between herself and the Captain Vanguard of whom they both loved to talk. Now, Belgravia and Brompton look at most matters in life, and particularly those connected with the affections, from different points of view. Kate, though a hybrid belonging to both districts, partook largely of the sentiments and feelings affected by the latter. She imagined a touching little romance, of which Jin's dark, curly-headed boy was the sequel, and being herself *sans peur*, determined to show Frank she did not hold him *sans reproche*.

"Jump in," said she, with extreme abruptness, as he approached the carriage. "I've got a crow to pick with you, and I mean to have it out. You're a nice young man, now! Don't you think you are?"

"Certainly," answered Frank, with imperturbable *bonhomie*. "I used to hope you thought so too!"

"I'll tell you what I used to think," said Kate, lashing the pony with considerable vehemence. "I used to think you were a good fellow at heart, though the nonsense had never been taken out of you; that you were only vain and affected on the surface like lots of you guardsmen, but that there was a *man* inside the dandy, if one could only get at him. Oh, Captain Vanguard, I'm disappointed in you! If I cared two straws for a fellow and he

did as you've done, I'd never speak to him again! There!"

The whip was again dropped on the pony, and they shaved the wheels of an omnibus to an inch.

"Don't take it so to heart, Kate!" laughed Frank. "If I have deserted you, I'll come back again. You know, Miss Cremorne, that you are the only woman I ever loved, and all that. Fate has been obdurate; but rather would I be torn with wild"—

"*Will* you be serious?" demanded the fair charioteer, knitting her brows, and looking intensely austere. "Do you know where I am driving you now?"

He was incorrigible.

"To Gretna, I trust, or the Register Office. That's what I should like with *you*. Let's have it out, Kate. Jump over a broomstick, and the thing's done!"

"I'll tell you where you're going," she said gravely; "I am taking you to see Miss Ross!"

His whole countenance changed; and with all his self-command he could not disguise how deeply he was agitated.

"Miss Ross!" he stammered. "You have heard from her? You know where she is?"

"I have seen her every day for the last fortnight," was the answer. "Seen her battle and bear up against sorrow, sickness, privation—actual want! Ay, many a day, when you've been sitting down to a dinner of four courses and dessert, that woman and her boy—her boy, Captain Vanguard—have not had enough to eat!"

"Great Heavens, Kate!" he exclaimed. "This is too shocking! Why did I not know of it before?"

"Why, indeed!" repeated Kate. "You may well ask yourself the question. Whose duty was it but yours to be answerable for her, poor dear, to find her a home, to provide for her and the child? I don't want to have many words about it. I'm not one of that sort; but I tell you she would have starved—yes—*starved*, if I hadn't happened to run against her by good luck, just in the nick of time."

"God bless you, Kate!"

His eyes were full of tears, and she looked at him a little less hardly than before, but answered in scornful accents—

"Ought such a job as that to have been left to me?"

"Miss Cremorne! Kate!" he urged; "you think worse of me than I deserve! There is nothing I wouldn't have done, no sacrifice I wouldn't have made, to ensure Miss Ross's comfort! It is not my fault, indeed! I give you my word of honour I have left no stone unturned to discover her place of refuge from the moment she disappeared, and never obtained the slightest trace of her till to-day."

"Gammon!" replied Kate, pulling the pony short up by the kerbstone. "There's the house. It's not much to look at, but it's better inside than out, since she's found a chance friend, poor thing! Run upstairs and see her. Say I meant to have taken her out for a drive, but I'll come again in the afternoon. I never did — I never will — believe you're a bad-hearted fellow, Frank; but you've done no end of mischief here. Go and undo it now."

So Kate drove off at high pressure, leaving Frank on the doorstep, confronting a maid-of-all-work, who, seeming to expect him, yet glanced

Miss Ross stopped short on the threshold.

from time to time with considerable interest and approval at his general appearance and outline.

He was shown into a clean, neatly furnished apartment, from which he could distinctly hear his announcement as "The gentleman, if you please, ma'am," and the rustle of a dress that followed this information. Then the door opened, and Miss Ross stopped short on the threshold, exclaiming only—

"Frank!"

The tone denoted nothing but extreme and overwhelming astonishment.

Looking in her face, he could not but admit she was sadly altered. A few short weeks had changed the brilliant, piquante beauty to a faded invalid, with wan, wasted features, lit up only by the wonderful black eyes.

His first thought was the humiliating question—"Can this be the woman I fancied I loved so dearly?" His second brought a manly and natural resolution to stand by her all the more firmly for her distress.

"Jin," he exclaimed, "why did you leave me like that? What has been the matter? and why didn't you trust entirely to me?"

He would have taken her in his arms, but she waved him off, and the delight that had flashed across her face when she confronted him gave way to a cold, unnatural reserve.

"Did you get my letter?" she asked. "And why are you here?"

He explained how and why he had come, touching on the disappointment he experienced in the contents of her communication, trying to put into his tones that warmth of affection which he felt was completely extinguished in his heart.

"I did not mean to see you again, Captain Vanguard," she said in a measured voice; "I did not *wish* to see you again. The person I expected was your friend, Mr. Picard. That man stands between us, and always must. I will have no more concealments now—no more foul play—no more crime. I have been punished enough; I pray Heaven I may not be punished yet more! I deceived you, Captain Vanguard, because I—well—I believe I *did* care for you, as much as it is in my wicked, heartless nature to care for anybody; but I meant you to marry me. And all the time Picard was my husband!"

"Your husband!" He had no power to utter another word.

"It takes your breath away," she exclaimed, with a touch of her old malice. "You are so innocent! so inexperienced! Frank, I believe you did mean honestly by me. I believe you thought you liked me; and I certainly—well—I liked you. Horribly—shamefully! To win you, I was guilty of a fraud, a degradation, *une bassesse, entendez-vous? une lâcheté.* I took the letter of a girl who loved you, and I sent it off to another man—a good creature, *mais tant soit peu ganache,* who didn't know what to make of it. Never mind. I detached you from her, and caught you for myself. But I would not make you a slave to my husband; I know him too well. None of us come out of this *imbroglio* very creditably, and, believe me, your part is not of the highest calibre; but I have injured you, and now, because my spirit is broke, I try to make reparation. Go to your Miss Hallaton; explain all to her; marry her, if you will! Oh, Frank, be happy with her, I entreat of you; and never come to see me any more!"

She looked in his face for about half a second, made a plunge at his hand, caught it eagerly to her heart, her eyes, her lips, and was in the next room, of which he heard the door locked and bolted, before he had realised the fact that she was gone.

He waited, he called, he went and tapped at that securely fortified retreat, he even rang for the servant and begged her to ask the lady whether there were no more commands for him before he left; but without avail.

"Why the devil Kate brought me here," said Frank to himself, standing once more in the street, looking helplessly about for a hansom cab, "is more than I can make out! One thing's clear—I'm not bound in any way to Miss Ross. Hang it! she's *not* Miss Ross! What a fool I've been! I don't deserve to get out of the mess so well. Helen, my darling! I ought to have known, if they hadn't got at you, you'd have been as true as steel! By Jove, though, I'm bound in honour to book up to Kate! It must have cost her a goodish stake, and I don't suppose Picard will."

But when this proposal was submitted to Miss Cremorne, she repudiated it with a contempt savouring of Belgravia, and an energy of expression not unworthy of Brompton.

CHAPTER XXXI

REPENTANT

ISS ROSS, as we may still continue to call her, had indeed expected a visit from a gentleman, and warned the maid-of-all-work she would be at home; but it was with a heavy heart, nevertheless, she heard the street door close on Frank's retreating steps, while, smoothing her hair and drying her eyes, she prepared to meet her husband. Picard, at his wits' end for money, hunted from place to place by writ and summons, with debts unpaid and bills coming due, could yet find time to answer in person a written request for an interview, made by the woman whose evil genius he seemed to have been through life. She asked to see him once more, for reasons to be explained in person, and was actually waiting his arrival when Kate drove to the door with Frank Vanguard. The latter had hardly been gone five minutes, ere Picard made his appearance, and this ill-assorted couple met once more, with less surprise indeed, but scarcely more cordiality than they had shown during their strange ill-omened companionship on the river at Windsor.

Each thought the other looking faded, worn, altered; each wondered where had lain the attraction, once so fatally powerful; each, I think, was resolved at heart this interview should be the last.

"How's the boy?" said Picard, glancing round the room in search of his child.

For answer, she opened a door into the adjoining apartment, signing to him, wearily and sadly, to go in.

On a neat, snowy little bed, drawn near the open window, lay the child, wan, wasted, scarcely conscious; his large eyes wandering vaguely here and there, his small, fragile hands limp and helpless on the counterpane. He gave his mother a feeble glance of recognition; but of the other visitor he took no notice whatever.

Picard's mouth was dry, and a knot seemed to rise in his throat.

"How's this?" he muttered, in a fierce, husky voice, trying to keep down his tears by making himself angry. "The child is fearfully ill! It is too bad! I ought never to have trusted you with him! I should have thought his mother would have taken better care!"

The taunt was unfelt, unheeded. She showed no displeasure; but turned her large eyes on him with a plaintive, solemn sadness that spoke volumes, that told of dreary, waking nights, of anxious, sorrowing days, of cruel alternations between hope and despair, of piteous, calm resignation, that comes only when the last chance has faded gradually away. Picard went to the window and looked out. A harder-hearted man probably did not walk the streets of London that day; but the one thing on earth he cared for was his child, and he saw the humble, dirty little street through a mist of tears.

"It is the only link between us now," said Jin, in a measured, mournful voice. "If it should part, God help us both! I do believe you care for that poor, pale, suffering darling! For his sake, let us forgive one another!"

He was touched, penitent, and for the moment a better man.

"Virginie," he said, "I have deceived you—doubly deceived you! Our marriage was valid enough."

Her heart sank within her.

"Then I am really your wife?" she faltered; but glancing at the boy, added bravely, "I will try to be a good one from this day forth."

A man's whole nature is not to be changed by a few tears and a minute's emotion. Dashing his hand across his eyes, Picard reviewed the position, and was his own bad self again. Less than ever would it suit him now to be hampered with the incumbrance of a family. He could scarce keep his head above water. To provide for mother and child would swamp him completely. While doing ample justice to his wife's sense of duty, he resolved by no means to imitate her; and with an assumption of great frankness, thus delivered himself—

"Your resolution is most creditable, Virginie, and I know to-day that I have never done you justice. But I have met lately with reverses, misfortunes, and at present it is impossible to make any arrangement by which you and I can be together as much as I might wish."

An expression of intense relief came over her weary face, yet she drew near the child's bed, suspiciously, instinctively, like an animal protecting its young.

He observed and understood the action.

"Our poor boy cannot be moved,' said he. "You will be a good mother, Virginie, if I leave him to you! Perhaps I may never see him again."

Once more he betrayed real emotion; while Jin, from an impulse she could neither resist nor explain, raised the feeble little form on its bed, and supported the wan brow to which Picard's lips clung in a long farewell kiss. He would have blessed the child had he dared; but with the half-formed prayer came a sense of shameful unworthiness and a bitter hopeless remorse that he had been so bad a man.

In true womanly unselfishness, and with a certain readiness of immediate resource peculiar to her sex, Jin made a mental calculation of her humble little stores, reserving the small sum she thought would suffice till her boy's recovery, and offered the remainder ungrudgingly to her husband.

No doubt his excuses to himself were valid and unanswerable. He accepted it without hesitation, accepted, though he must have known it had been given her by another, and was all she had in the world.

To Jin, it seemed as if she had thus bought back the unquestioned possession of her child.

He wished her good-bye calmly and kindly enough, resolving, no doubt, that they should never meet on earth again; but, bad as he was, he cut a lock of that cluster of black curls tumbled on the pillow, and many a day afterwards would he take it out of his pocket-book to look on it for minutes at a time, with sad, repentant longing, that yet produced no good result. Sentiment is not affection. There may be much romance, with very little attachment; and many a man believes he is extremely fond of a woman or a child, for whom he will not sacrifice a momentary gratification or an hour's amusement.

When Picard went his way, Jin clasped the boy in her arms, as if he had just been rescued from some imminent danger; nor could all Kate Cremorne's persuasions, calling an hour afterwards in the pony-carriage, induce her to leave him during the rest of the afternoon.

It was for no want of nursing, from no lack of care and culture, that this poor little flower faded and withered away.

August waned into September, and still the child drooped with the drooping leaves. To the doctor, to the landlady, to the weeping maid-of-all-work, to everyone, save only a mother, it was evident that his Christmas carols would be sung to him by the angels in heaven.

But though here a poor little violet may be trampled into earth, is that a reason why the fairest garden flowers should fail to bloom, fragrant and splendid, over yonder? Never a red rose in all the garlands of the house of Lancaster blushed so becomingly, to Goldthred's taste, as did his own affianced bride when she ordered him to ask her whether she had not better think about naming the day of their marriage.

It was fixed for the middle of the month, the lady arranging to spend her honeymoon at a farmhouse of her own, far off in the West of England, where there was excellent partridge-shooting. She explained her arrangements to Helen with characteristic frankness.

"You see, my dear, I've been married before, and I know what it is. When Mr. Lascelles and I were alone together, the first week, it was *awful*! I wouldn't have believed man or woman could be so bored, and live. He must have hated it, and, I'm sure, so did I. Now, I don't want my goldfinch

to be bored with me, particularly at first; so I shall send him out shooting. He'll come home tired and hungry, and we shall make no fuss, but feel as if we'd been married for years. 'Pon my word, dear, he's such a good fellow, I wish we had!"

To all which wisdom, gathered from experience, Helen turned an attentive ear, because of the pleadings urged by a certain young officer, who felt and owned himself unworthy of the happiness he implored day by day, hour by hour, till she contradicted him flatly, out of the fulness of her own heart. Frank Vanguard succeeded in justifying himself before an exceedingly lenient tribunal; and although, in my opinion, the unaccountable silence of one woman is no valid excuse for transferring allegiance incontinently to another, I do not imagine ladies themselves are equally exclusive in their notions of property. They affect a very stringent law of trespass, no doubt; yet appear sufficiently merciful to habitual and hardened offenders.

The most jealous of them seem to appreciate an admirer none the less that he has offered incense at many foreign shrines. If he should have tumbled a goddess or two off her pedestal, they profess themselves shocked indeed, and are loud in reproof, but seem to like him all the better for his infidelity.

So Frank and Helen were to be married, Sir Henry giving them his blessing and the bride's *trousseaux*, for which tasteful and magnificent outfit the bills were eventually sent in to Frank; but this has nothing to do with our story. The cavalry officer, I venture to pronounce, had better luck than he deserved; but so exemplary a daughter as Helen had proved herself was pretty sure to make an exemplary wife. And, for my own part, I believe

that a good woman, with good sense, and a really good temper, especially if gifted also with good looks, is capable of reclaiming the whole Household Brigade, horse and foot, bands, trumpeters, drummers, officers, non-commissioned officers, and men.

Sir Henry Hallaton, however, with gross injustice, laid his ruin on that sex to which he had devoted what he was pleased to call the best years of his life, majestically ignoring all such deteriorating influences as extravagant habits, dissipated company, gambling, mortgages, second-rate race-horses, and protested bills.

It needed no syren to lure the baronet on the rocks; and, indeed, the tide of fortune, whether it ebbed or flowed, seemed alike to waft this reckless, easy-going mariner to certain shipwreck. His was a sadly shattered barque now, and he had abandoned all idea of making safe anchorage at last. He came back to England, rescued from ruin by the timely aid of a friend, and thought himself ill-used because that friend was on the eve of marriage with a woman whom he had neglected while he thought she liked him, to whose heartlessness, he now told himself, he was a martyr, because she had not waited for an uncertainty, but made a wise choice in pleasing herself.

The daughter he loved so dearly was about to settle happily in life; yet he could complain that he was deserted, bewailing his loneliness, though he saw the light in her eye, the peace on her brow, that told of heart's-ease and content. In the restless, dissatisfied longings of a confirmed selfishness, he tried hard to re-establish his former intimacy with Miss Ross, whose retreat he had found means to discover; and, failing to obtain an interview with

that anxious and afflicted woman, found himself driven for solace and comfort to the society of Kate Cremorne.

This young person, whose knowledge of the world was drawn from men, not books, seeing through the weary, worn-out pleasure-seeker at a glance, fooled him with considerable dexterity, and no little mischievous amusement.

Of all his reckless moods, perhaps none had been so reckless as that in which he offered to make so free-spoken a damsel his wife; of all his humiliations, none, perhaps, so galling as to accept a kindly, courteous, and dignified refusal from the wild, wayward girl, who bade him understand clearly that she respected herself too much to affect an attachment it was impossible to feel for a man old enough to be her father!

Mrs. Battersea was provoked, and opined Kate would never grow wiser, but Sir Henry, while to the outward world his good-humour and good spirits remained unchanged, took the rebuff sorely to heart, and though he told his doctor he had been drinking sweet champagne, which never agreed with him, my own belief is that a fit of gout, which attacked him at this juncture more sharply than usual, was the effect of love rather than wine. When we begin twinges at the extremities, it is time to have done with pains of the heart.

So his doctor ordered him to Buxton, where, soothed by the bubble of those health-restoring springs, he forgot his sorrows in the unintermittent attention to self required by the constant ablutions and daily discipline of the cure, deriving at the same time no small comfort from the contemplation of many sufferers, more crippled, more peevish, more egotistical than himself.

There is no particular season at Buxton, as there is no forgiveness or immunity from Podagra, goddess of sloth, and luxury, and excess. Its waters are drunk, its baths are heated, its lodging-houses are occupied, its parade populous, during every month of the year. Nevertheless its frequenters are necessarily migratory. Those who get better go away, those who get worse die; but disease sends in a continuous supply of fresh afflictions, and the residence of a very few weeks causes a patient to be looked on as an old inhabitant and high authority in the place. The head of the *table-d'hôte*, the easiest chair on the parade, the newest books from the library, the choicest game from the poulterer, the sweetest smile from landlady, the lowest bow from landlord, are the advantages to be attained by six weeks' tenure of an obstinate case; and thus it came to pass that Sir Henry, though a far greater man in St. James's Street, found he could not hold a candle to Uncle Joseph at Buxton.

Like two veterans in Chelsea, like two old men-of-war's men in Greenwich Hospital, these campaigners of a less honourable warfare found themselves stranded in sadly shattered plight amongst the bare knolls and grey boulders of the Derbyshire Peak; but between them there was this important difference,—that whereas Sir Henry, still almost handsome, still gentleman-like, amusing, pleasant to women, had loved his love, gamed his gaming, and retired beaten from the strife; Uncle Joseph, older in years, ruder in speech, rounder of form, and stouter of heart, had refitted his shattered barque, and with favouring gales, backed by an energy that cannot be too highly commended, was prosecuting his suit with a widow almost as old, as round, and as gouty as himself.

There had been a time when Sir Henry would have laughed heartily at the confidential communications made by the respectable Mr. Groves, as the two drove out in a one-horse fly and halted to enjoy the mellow warmth of an autumn sun under a chasm, which takes from its impossible legend the name of the Lover's Leap; but he did not laugh to-day, listening with attention, interest, something akin to envy at his heart. What would he not have given could he, too, take pleasure in a woman's smile, even though the woman were old and fat; could he, too, feel his blood course quicker at a woman's voice, even though it had a provincial accent, and an occasional confusion of the rules by which the aspirate is applied in our language?

"I congratulate you," said Sir Henry, lying languidly back in the carriage with a plaintive air of resignation, and a sad conviction that for him most pleasures were indeed over, since his doctor had even forbidden him to smoke. "You have retained the best faculties of youth, since you have still courage to hope, still energy to be vexed and disappointed. It is not so with me. Look here, my dear fellow; I have been ruined twice since I began, and twice set on my legs by a miracle. I would willingly be ruined a third time, and never be set up at all, if I could only take a real interest in any earthly thing, even in what I am going to have for dinner."

Uncle Joseph stared. "It's not so with me," he answered; "far from it. I wish I didn't care so much. I'm a desperate fidget sometimes, I know, and often I can't enjoy things just for fear of what might happen. Perhaps it's because I'm an old bachelor, as they say. It's a great drawback to

a man in middle-age to have passed all his youth out of the society of women."

Sir Henry smiled and shook his head.

"I haven't found the other plan a good one," said he. "You and I have been a goodish time in the world now, and I begin to think we have both wasted our lives."

CHAPTER XXXII

RECLAIMED

DAY after day, week after week, an autumn sun glared fiercely down, baking and cracking the clean-shorn stubbles, burnishing the meadows, all parched and smooth and shining, licking up with fiery thirst the shrunken threads of mountain streams, scorching the heather bloom to powder, burning to rich ripeness the strips of late-sown oats that through our wild hill-countries fringe the purple moorland with a border of gold, beating on heated wall and glowing pavement in the small close streets about the Marlborough Road, drying the outer air to the temperature of an oven, and withering without pity the humble little growth of mignonette in the sick child's window.

Morning and night Jin watered that homely box of mould in vain. The dying plants no more revived for her care, than did her darling for all the tears she shed on his behalf. They wanted for nothing now that money could supply — Kate Cremorne would have taken care of that; but Jin's friends, directly they found out her hiding-place, had rallied round her with kindly offers of sympathy and assistance. Mrs. Lascelles, indeed, wished to bring mother and child home to No. 40 at once, but the latter was too ill to be moved; and kind-hearted Rose, in spite of her present happiness,

felt sadly vexed to think that the former could refuse persistently to see her now, denying herself to every human being except Miss Cremorne.

With all her resolution it was more than Jin could endure to be reminded of the happiness she had once so nearly grasped, and in her dull, forlorn misery she told herself it was better to hide her weary head, and wait in hopeless apathy for the end.

She had gone through those cruel changes that seem so hard to bear till the one fearful certainty teaches us they were merciful preparations for that which we should not otherwise have found strength to encounter. She had watched the doctor's face day by day, and hung on his grave, sympathising accents, believing now that the "shade better" meant recovery, now that the "trifle worse" was but the necessary ebb and flow of disease; anon, lifted to unreasonable happiness from darkest despair, because when her ignorance thought all was over, the man of science still found anchorage for a new ephemeral hope.

Alas! that henceforth there must be no more vicissitude, no more uncertainty! The last strand of the cable was obviously parting—the little lamp was flickering with the gleam that so surely goes out in utter darkness—the simple flower, drooping and dying, was to bloom never more but in the gardens of God!

Even Kate, who seldom failed to find a word of comfort at the worst, to discover seeds of encouragement in the most alarming symptoms, had turned from the boy's bed to-day with a quiver over all her bonny face, that showed how hard it was for her to keep back the tears.

Jin caught her friend's hand, and pressed it to her breast.

"God bless you, dear!" she gasped. "Whatever happens, you've been an angel from heaven to me!"

The other dropped her veil till it covered brow and face.

"My poor dear!" she answered, with a strange tremor in her voice, "the angels in heaven are like him, not me. If it *must* be—if you are to lose him—try and think of him as one of them—try and hope you and I may get to see him there at last, even if we have to sit waiting for ages on a stone outside the gate."

Both women were silent, Kate turning away to cry passionately. In a few minutes she recovered herself, pressed her lips fiercely to the child's cold hand lying helpless on the bedclothes, again to Jin's pale, sorrowing brow, and so departed, with a promise, in a husky, choking whisper, of returning speedily, and an entreaty that she might be sent for at a moment's notice if she were wanted.

So the mother was left alone with her dying child. She had not shed a tear—no—though the other woman wept without restraint; that infection, usually so irresistible, had failed to reach her now. Her eyes were dry, her face cold and fixed like marble. Mechanically she moved about the room, arranging the furniture, straightening the sheets, smoothing the pillows, mixing a cooling drink for the poor pale lips that would never drink again. Then, as in unconscious routine she watered the mignonette at the window, she caught her breath with a great gasp, her face worked like that of a woman in convulsions, and she burst into a fit of weeping that seemed intense relief for the moment, and rendered her capable of enduring the worst, which was yet to come.

In such paroxysms memory seems, as it were, to lift us out of the present, and furnishing us with a new sense,—keen, subtle, and intense,—throws our whole existence back once more into the past. Again she was nursing Gustave under the poplars in Touraine; again she was impressing on a homely peasant-woman, at Lyons, the care and culture of her darling; again she mourned for his loss and rejoiced in his recovery, staring with incredulous pleasure to recognise him on the road to Ascot, thrilling with a mother's holiest instincts to fold him to her breast in the old cottage by the riverside. Her troubles, her intrigues, her love, her rivalry, Picard, Frank Vanguard, Helen herself, were forgotten; no human interest, no earthly image, came between her and her dark-eyed boy.

It seemed impossible he could be dying. Dying? Oh no! or why had he been given back to her before? Was there no Providence? Was it only blind chance that thus juggled with her? She thought of women she had known in her earlier years—*femmes croyantes*, as they called themselves—their penances, duties, attendance at mass, frequent confessions, and the courage with which they boasted their religion enabled them to accept every trial—till it came.

Pain was lashing her into rebellion. She roused herself. She dashed her tears from her eyes. "Bah!" she exclaimed; "if he gets well, I will be like these. Why not for me also a miracle? What have I done that I am to be so tortured?"

A weak voice called her from the bed. "Maman," it murmured, in the dear French accents of its infancy, "embrasse-moi donc, puis ce que je ne te vois plus."

She laid her head—the two black comely heads

The sorrowing mother wailed in agony over her dead child

together — on the pillow by his side. The hope that had flickered for a moment died out for evermore. Not see her! and it was broad noon of the golden summer day!

"Here is mamma, darling!" she murmured, pressing hard to her lips the little helpless hand, dull and yellow like waxwork. "Mamma will never leave Gustave! never—never!"

She tried to borrow courage from the assurance, and to fancy that *he* was not leaving *her*, swiftly, surely, as the outward-bound barque that spreads its canvas to a wind off shore.

He nestled nearer — nearer yet. His little frame shook all over. Raising him on the pillow, his curly head sank back on her bosom, more heavily, more helplessly than in earliest infancy. He murmured a few indistinct syllables. Straining every nerve to listen, she knew they formed part of a child's prayer that Mrs. Mole had taught him in her cottage home. But he finished that prayer at the feet of his Father who is in heaven.

Minutes, hours — she never knew how long— the sorrowing mother bowed her head, and wailed in agony over her dead child. Neither stunned nor stupefied by an affliction for which her daily life had of late been but a training and a preparation, every nerve in her frame, every fibre of her heart, quivered with the sting and sharpness of the blow.

Had she not wept, she must have gone mad; but her tears flowed freely, and with tears came that lassitude of the feelings which is the first step to resignation, as lacking the rebellious energy of despair. For her, indeed, the silver cord was loosed, the golden bowl broken, the desire of her eyes taken away. The day had gone down: the

night seemed very dark and cold. How should she seek for comfort in the hope of another dawn?

But when the skies are at their blackest, then morning is near at hand. It was through thickest gloom, brooding over a lowering wave, that the luminous figure of their Teacher walked the waters on the Sea of Tiberias, and the boldest of His servants had sunk to the knees ere he took refuge in his panicstricken outcry, "Lord, save me!" and, trusting solely to the Master, found help in the very weakness of his fears.

Perhaps angels in heaven recognise and mark in golden letters the hour of conviction, the accepted time, the turning-point, it may be, of a soul's eternity. Perhaps, even in their lustrous happiness, they rejoiced with celestial sympathy over the lonely penitent who flung herself down by her child's deathbed, and poured out her heart in prayer that, through any sacrifice, any suffering, she might follow where he was gone before. Perhaps they knew how poor, contrite, sorrowing Jin Ross had made her first step on the narrow path that leads to the Shining Gate, over which, for sinners of far deeper dye than her, stands emblazoned the eternal promise—"Knock, and it shall be opened unto you!"

THE END

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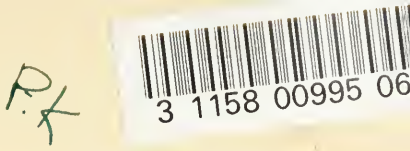

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